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Countess Sarah

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THE COUNTESS SARAH

CHAPTER I

As the Seine approaches Melun it is hemmed in between two slopes, one of which—with a southern aspect—verdant and smiling, planted with vines and warmed by the sun, mirrors the white houses of its villages in the glistening waters of the river. The other, exposed to the north and fringed by the outlying plantations of the forest of Fontainebleau, is severe, cold, and somewhat sad of aspect. A stone bridge bestrides the river and connects the two sections of the road leading from Melun to Bois-le-Roi. Cutting athwart the forest, this road ascends in a direct line towards a keeper's lodge, the red-tiled roof of which stands out brightly against the gloomy foliage of the grand old trees. The road then skirts the boundary of the park of Canalheilles, which is embosomed in the forest and only separated from it by deep, broad trenches. When the trees begin to shoot at springtime the frightened deer leap into the park and ramble over the vast lawns, even to the flower-beds of the Chateau, where at night-time they voluptuously munch the roses.

The Chateau, which is an admirable specimen of Renaissance art, was built during the reign of Francis the First by a Count de Canalheilles, who was the favourite of the King, and who shared with him, if scandalmongers are to be believed, the favours of the beautiful Countess de Châteaubriant. The court of honour is entered by a monumental gateway, above which a panting stag, pursued by a huntsman and his hounds, is carved in the stonework. This masterpiece, due to the chisel of Germain Pilon, procured notoriety for that marvellous sculptor, who was then only five-and-twenty, and proved the starting-point of his artistic

fortune. On either side of the court of honour stand the out-buildings, in which a regiment of servants might be lodged. The car of Amphitrite, drawn by four tritons discharging water from their horn-shaped shells, rises in the centre of a vast basin.

A noble flight of stone steps conducts to the marble-paved hall, on the walls of which the arms of all the families allied to the house of Canalheilles are painted; the ceiling being decorated with a curious fresco representing knights with crossed lances tilting in the lists. From here a broad staircase with a wrought-iron balustrade leads to the first floor. The furniture of the Chateau is of inestimable value. Carefully tended and restored by the heirs of the name, with all the taste of *grands seigneurs* disposing of an enormous fortune, it contains cabinets carved by Jean Goujon, dishes purchased of Bernard Palissy, and specimens of plate bearing Cellini's mark. In the dining-room, wainscoted with carved oak, the heavy gilded mouldings of the ceiling encompass a superb painting of Primaticcio, representing the Abduction of Europa. She is seated on the white bull, whose horns are decked with flowers. Her companions dance round her, holding each other's hands, and the sea fades away to azure on the horizon, offering far space to the divine ravisher. In a corner of the vast apartment stands a wooden chair upholstered with tapestry and woven with the arms of France. A bal of gilded wood extends from arm to arm to prevent anyone from sitting in it. King Francis the First reposed in it one day, after hunting, and since then it has never been used.

On the first floor of the main block will be found the reception-rooms—vast apartments, solemn and cold as the galleries of a museum, and which are only entered when grand fêtes are given. Under Louis the Fifteenth the De Canalheilles, imitating the extravagant fancies of their master, annexed to the Chateau a charming building in the style of the Trianon of Versailles; and after the Revolution this addition proved very serviceable to the less aristocratic heirs of the noble family. As the father of the present Count felt himself lost in the vast, severe-looking rooms of the Chateau, which it was almost impossible to warm, he decided

to reside in the newer building, leaving the grand abode of his ancestors deserted in its grave sepulchral majesty.

Born in 1812, Charles-Bernard-Amédée, the last of his race, had been one of the handsomest men of his time. An orphan at twenty, possessing one of the largest territorial fortunes in France, he did not give himself up to the easy pleasures of idle life, but entered the military school of St Cyr. He left it with a very fair place on the examination list, and was appointed a sub-lieutenant in a regiment of hussars. The Revolution of 1830 had just overthrown the Bourbons. The Count, who was personally intimate with the Princes of the House of Orleans, did not go into the sulks at the advent of the July Monarchy. The friendly sympathy which drew him towards these bright young Princes overcame his Legitimist preferences. He was the companion and the friend of the Duke d'Orléans, whose artistic tastes and love of elegance he shared. A first-class horseman, he became one of the foremost promoters of racing in France. He was seen in the silk jacket at the Champ-de-Mars, and then at the Croix-de-Berny guiding his stable to victory, and competing with the most celebrated English jockeys. Moreover, his name is inscribed on the list of the founders of the French Jockey Club. He was one of the most brilliant leaders of the gilded youth of the day. A thorough man about town, amusing himself in the society of the Mornays and the Lehons, he became particularly intimate with Monsieur de Morny, whose admirable political aptitudes he did not then suspect.

However, whilst leading a fast life, the Count did not neglect his military duties. Sent to Africa with his regiment, he served there very brilliantly, and fell, struck by two bullets, at the engagement of Mouzaia. Entangled under his horse, he was struggling against the Arabs, who were endeavouring to cut off his head, when a lieutenant of his regiment charged upon these bandits, and brought the Count back across his saddle-bows. This lieutenant, a young Bordelais without fortune, was named Jean Séverac.

Having rescued the Count from the Arabs, the lieutenant wished to rescue him from death; and the army having returned to its quarters, he tended his comrade with admirable

devotion. Although grave and somewhat sad, Lieutenant Séverac concealed a tender, passionate heart under his cold demeanour. He became warmly attached to the Count, and having saved him twice, he bore him that especial affection which almost always unites the person who has rendered a great service to the receiver. He, in fact, behaved towards Charles-Bernard-Amédée like an elder brother, gently scolding him whenever he indulged in any too startling piece of eccentricity, but without being able to resist the attraction which the Count's bright, careless nature exercised on his own cold, serious disposition. This puritan allowed himself to be dragged into joyous bouts; but it was only to please his friend, and he remained calm and grave even in the height of revelry, amid the clinking of glasses full of champagne, amid bursts of laughter, and with bare shoulders round about him. And when the pretty girls, who were the queens of these gay fêtes, joked over the young officer's demeanour, and asked Monsieur de Canaille, "Doesn't your friend ever thaw?" the Count answered, "Let him be. Séverac is amusing himself a great deal, only he amuses himself inwardly."

By dint of amusing himself inwardly, Séverac ended by disappearing. He was promoted to a captaincy, and, to the Count's great despair, sent to do garrison work at Montpellier. There he married, and led the quiet, toilsome life he was born for.

The Revolution of 1848, by overthrowing the established order of things, considerably disturbed the Count's career. He was then a Captain in a regiment of dragoons; and although he had accepted the July Monarchy, he could not make up his mind to serve the Republic. He applied to be withdrawn from active service, and went off to shoot blackcock in Austria. At first the re-establishment of the Empire barely pleased him; but his ideas were modified in a favourable sense by the enthusiasm of the nation,* and the proclamations guaranteeing "order." The advent of Monsieur de Morny to power dealt the final blow at the Count's prejudices. At once conquered by the advances which his

* We leave to M. Ohnet the responsibility of this statement concerning the "enthusiasm" of the French after the *coup d'état* — *T. ans.*

old associate made him with that haughty graciousness he alone possessed, the Count allowed himself to be drawn into the general current, and returned to active service. A few months later, he was attached to the military household of the Emperor, and became one of the most brilliant favourites of the Court of the Tuileries.

Séverac, on his side, still in the provinces, was striving to make his way by dint of merit and perseverance. The education of his little boy, Pierre, then seven years old, was beginning to occupy all the time he could spare from his duties. Still a Captain, although noted as one of the most meritorious officers in the army, he was patiently waiting for promotion. The Count, placed near the fountain-head of favour, had for two years already been a Major. Séverac had heard of his friend's promotion without any feeling of bitterness. When comrades shook their heads at the mess-table and said, "De Canalheilles is lucky," the Captain defended his friend most warmly. On those occasions Séverac thawed, and to some purpose.

However, the Crimean War became the starting-point of a brilliant career for the Captain. Promoted in his turn to be a Major at the outset of the campaign, he took part in General d'Allonville's advance at Balaclava, in view of carrying the Russian batteries, then cannonading the English Light Brigade, which had charged them with heroic temerity. The Major reached the muzzles of the guns, sabre in hand, the first, and he was decorated on the field of battle. He returned from the Crimea with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel, and with the reputation of being one of the most energetic officers of the army. It may be singular, but this man, so calm and gentle in ordinary life, never pronouncing one word louder than another, became positively terrible on the battlefield. He bristled like a lion, and his voice acquired a piercing sonority, which urged his soldiers on as if it had been a whip. After returning to France he exchanged into the Imperial Guard, fought in Italy in 1859, received three bullets at Solferina at the head of the First Regiment of Chasseurs d'Afrique, and was looked upon as lost. De Canalheilles, who was at headquarters with the Emperor,

immediately hastened to the spot and had his friend removed to Milan, where Madame Séverac soon arrived. Tended with untiring devotion by his wife, the wounded man, whom all the surgeons had given up, returned to life, and was promoted to be a General of Brigade—an advancement which greatly hastened his convalescence. Séverac had then outstripped the Count; but at the price of what efforts and through how many dangers?

He was always to the fore, and so, whenever a man of especial ability was needed, he was at once applied to. He then displayed all the acquirements he had derived from his patient studies. He revealed himself to be a first-class comptroller, and an accomplished tactician. In the army he was looked upon as one of the great leaders of the future. He possessed the confidence of his men, and succeeded where another would have failed, for the troops under his command had no moments of weakness. In Mexico he covered himself with glory, and executed a masterly retreat from San Luis de Potosí to Vera-Cruz without leaving a single cannon or a single man in the hands of Juárez's partisans. In 1867 Séverac was a General of Division and Chief of the Staff of the Minister of War. In 1870 he started one of the first for the Army of the Rhine, a corps of which he was appointed to command. He was not present at the first reverses, which made him quiver with patriotic indignation, but on the 14th of August, when the army was marching towards Verdun, he was placed in the post of honour; it was his task to protect the retreat.

On being furiously attacked by the advanced guard of Prince Frederic Charles at Borny, he had a moment of deep joy; he felt himself master of the battle. The enemy began to give way at about four o'clock in the afternoon. But as he rode to the front in view of hastening the advance of his artillery, which was already raining shells upon the Germans, the latter made a final attack on the bridge of Borny. They were repulsed, but they amply avenged their defeat. A fragment of a shell wounded General Séverac mortally. He fell, with fading gaze he saw the Germans retreat like a black mass of ants, and a smile of pride lighted up his face. His officers leaned forward, looking at him

anxiously. A violet shade fell upon his features, which assumed an expression of admirable grandeur and serenity. Thinking of the devoted, tender spouse, and of the son he would leave behind him, he murmured, "Poor wife!—Dear child!" Then turning to his staff, he added. "Tell the Emperor to concentrate the troops. One can only overcome those men in masses." And he died. The brave soldier's last thought had been for the means of assuring victory.

De Canalheilles was in despair when he heard of his friend's death. Carried away by the tornado of events which day by day increased in gravity, realising clearly enough that France was marching to disaster, he envied the General his glorious fate. Caught, however, in the mousetrap of Sedan, he did not abandon his vanquished, humbled master, but followed him to Wilhelmshöhe.

Meanwhile, Pierre Séverac, who had just left the Staff School, was preparing to avenge the hero of Borny. He was a handsome young fellow, slim and refined in bearing like his father, and dark-haired like his mother, who had been a beautiful type of those women of the South, with creamy complexions and flashing eyes. He had the firmness and coolness of the former, and the gentle, caressing grace of the latter, a kind of Creole languor full of charm. Hitherto a favourite in society, with a disposition for indulging in pleasure, Pierre changed abruptly on his father's death. He had so far been careless and frivolous, relying on the paternal judgment to advise and lead him. Suddenly, however, he found himself alone without a guide, and with the task of sustaining and consoling his poor mother, who was crushed by the loss of a husband she had worshipped as a god. Pierre had to become a protector on his entry into life instead of being protected.

He showed himself equal to the duties he had to fulfil. In one day he became a man. Never was a tender, devoted daughter as attentive and as thoughtful as this big fellow towards his mother. Brought back to Paris at the outset of the siege with Blanchard's corps, of which he formed part, he divided his time between his duties and the sorrowing widow. As soon as he had an hour's spare time, he hastened to the Rue Monsieur-le-Prince, to the modest

apartment where Madame Séverac resided, and with his ears still full of the roar of artillery and the rattling of musketry, he tried to cheer her. To wean her from the sadness of the present, he talked to her of the future.

He would certainly marry, he said, and she would see herself live o'er again in her grandchildren. What a joy it would be for her to pass her fingers through the curly locks of their fair little heads! The frightful gap which death had made in her life would be filled up again. And she would at least have a calm, peaceful life, after having been happy so long.

Madame Séverac smiled vaguely, making an effort to appear as if she believed in the realisation of this dream, and then silence ensued between them; the son and the mother became absorbed in their thoughts. The image of the dear departed rose before them. They asked themselves if it were really possible that they were separated from him for ever. Around them everything recalled him, his portrait hung upon the wall, there was the arm-chair in which he had sat but a few weeks previously, there on the table lay objects familiar to him, and which seemed to await his return. Little by little the illusion took possession of the mother and the son; they thought they could hear his tread in the adjoining room—the door was about to open, he was about to speak. But a sudden pang at the heart recalled them to reality. Their eyes met, overflowing with tears, and they averted their heads in silence, realising full well that a word from either of them would have made them burst into sobs. And thus in the early twilight of those wintry days, they remained motionless, listening with a painful shudder to the dull booming of the cannon, which recalled the proximity of the enemy who had taken from them the loved one whom they mourned.

Then Pierre slowly rose to his feet, embraced his mother, and, without again trying to offer her what he felt was futile consolation, he took his way back to the outposts. There, in the silence of the fields, intersected by trenches above the parapets of which there gleamed from time to time the rifle of some sentinel in ambush, he remained for hours gazing on the grey horizon. Abandoned beetroots

and cabbages were withering on the frozen soil between the French and German lines. At the distance of a thousand yards a line of black meagre trees fringed a deserted road. Beyond, the ground rose in a gentle slope towards the villages of L'Hay and Chevilly, the white houses of which were obscured by the fog. On the right-hand side, below Chatillon, the German batteries were slowly firing on the French forts, and the shells passed snorting through the frigid air. Not a human being was to be seen in the enemy's entrenchments. It was a siege carried on by an invisible army, concealed underground, but revealing its presence on days of combat, by well-fed volleys and crushing cannonades, of which only the smoke and flame could be detected.

Full of suppressed rage, Pierre languished waiting for the promised sorties, anxious to march forward, to fight, conquer, and inflict upon the enemy all the sufferings they made him endure. He was tortured by the thought that the tomb where his father reposed for ever was in the power of the foe. It seemed to him a profanation that the glorious departed should remain in the hands of those he had defeated. He longed to have the power of hurling the whole band of invaders back across the frontier at one blow, so as to be able to go and kneel beside the rescued grave. And days followed days; futile combats, fruitless attempts, massacres without result came in succession with distressing, disheartening effect. Famine stretched her black veil over the city. And still nothing appeared on the horizon—neither enemies nor army of relief. The absence of change was complete, and Paris continued agonising, still stoical and obstinate.

During the earlier days of the siege Pierre had explained the defensive operations progressing under the walls of Paris to his mother, and had confided his hopes to her, in view of diverting her mind from her bitter mourning. A *sortie en masse* would soon be made, and the besieging army, cut in two, would be thrown back into the Champagne. With the help of the armies which were being recruited on the Loire, offensive operations would be resumed, and France, steadily advancing, would drive the enemy to the

frontier Still and ever the thought of delivering his father's tomb haunted Pierre imperiously. He did not say to his mother, "We will drive the Germans far from our loved one's grave, and we shall be able to pray and weep above the slab that entombs him, without the heavy tread of a Prussian sentry disturbing our mourning." He would have feared causing her affliction by such words. But they intuitively understood each other, he did not need to speak to express his thoughts. And when he cried, "We shall drive them beyond Metz, and the city will be ours again," there was a hoarse vibration in his voice, and an ill-repressed gleam in his eyes, which made the widow tremble. She felt that there was more filial affection than patriotism in the passion which was consuming Pierre, and that he was urged forward not so much by a wish to see the tricolour wave triumphantly above the great fortress as by a longing to go and kneel before a black wooden cross in the corner of a green cemetery.

When it became evident to the young officer that the efforts made by the Army of Paris would prove illusory and fruitless, he fell into deep melancholy. He showed himself even yet more gentle and more loving towards his mother, as if he felt the need of atoning for military helplessness by filial affection. He made no further reference to the defence, and on the morrow of an engagement, whenever Madame Séverac, delighted to see him safe again, asked him to describe the combat, and tell her what he had done himself, an answer had positively to be forced from him. "We fought, we lost so many men——" he said evasively, and the tone in which he uttered the short, habitual phrase, showed that he despaired of victory. The troops fought and died, it only served to save the national honour. That was all.

He regularly brought half of his rations to his mother, and when the widow, who had her scruples, said to him, "But you are depriving yourself?" he gently, but firmly, answered, "No; we are allowed too much." The truth is, he barely had sufficient; but he could not reconcile himself to the idea of his mother suffering. As he passed through the streets he saw the long files of women and children

waiting outside the butchers' shops under the low, yellowish, snow-laden sky; and he knew how hard life was in the city with this horrible wintry cold, leagued on the enemy's side. Whenever he came into Paris he brought his own bread under his cloak, the white bread reserved for combatants, and arranged with his mother's servant to substitute it for the black, sticky compound which was sold to the civilian population. He fought like a madman at Buzenval, where he fully realised that the army was firing its last cartridges. He was fortunate enough not to be killed, and he returned into Paris dreading an imminent capitulation. The disheartened soldiers, who were tired of suffering to no purpose, accused their leaders, and insolently cried: "That's enough, we won't have any more of it."

The end of the war, which came as a relief to so many people, was a crushing blow for Pierre. All his hopes crumbled at the same time. He had retained secret illusions till the last day. He had relied on chance. When he was certain that it was all over he returned home, and lay in bed for a couple of days with his face turned to the wall, motionless as if he had been dead. The necessity of tranquillising his mother, who was alarmed by his despair, compelled him to make an effort, and he regained a semblance of life. But suddenly he conceived a violent hatred for this city of Paris which he had defended with so much ardour. Thinking that the Germans were about to enter the capital, he would not remain there. He preferred to cross their lines and hide himself in his father's little country house at Bois-le-Roi, in the solitude of the fields.

There he became calm again. The sight of the familiar spot where he had spent a portion of his childhood imbued him with resigned sadness. He found something that recalled the memory of his father in each room of the house, at each turn of the garden paths. He sought for these meetings with the loved one whom he so tenderly regretted, and found an unforeseen attraction in them. And then the healthy, vivifying forest air had its effect upon them, throwing him into a state of delicious prostration. He felt lassitude in every limb, and slept for twelve hours at a stretch. Overcome with fatigue, he retired to rest after

dinner, and, even when awakened by the birds singing in the trees, he lingered in bed with his eyes half open, following his rambling thoughts. During the daytime he went off into the forest with a book. He was able to view the spring-tide revival of nature. The verdant shoots were bursting through the bark of the branches; the grass grew green in the ditches, with daisies and narcissus in flower. The sun was warm, the sky was blue, and in the deep silence of the forest Pierre, with an empty head and heavy limbs like after a lingering illness, remained during long hours watching the leaves stirred by the breeze and the clouds carried off towards the horizon. It was the convalescence of his grief.

At times, whilst he sat at the foot of a tree beside a secluded pathway, the thud of a horse's hoofs made him start. Some red-whiskered German officer, erect in his tight-fitting uniform, was dreaming, in German fashion, in the solitude, leaving the bitter scent of bad tobacco behind him. Pierre dived into the depths of the wood, with a wrinkle of pain upon his brow, and listened to the measured tread of the horse as it went off, making its saddle-leather crack, and jingling the steel chains of its bit. These were his bad days. However, he often met an old brigadier of the forest keepers, who was visiting the "cuts" of the year, with his gun slung over his shoulder. He paused to talk with him on the outskirts of a plantation, and the old soldier recounted the sufferings of the invasion. Tapping the butt-end of his gun, and waving his hand towards the German convoys—which now peacefully followed the road from Fontainebleau to Melun, crushing the highways under the wheels of their heavy waggons laden with mysterious objects—the old keeper exclaimed, with a threatening air, "Ah! they didn't dare pass through the woods during the war. They took the long way round, so as to be in the open country. All the poachers of the part had assembled in the forest, and, to tell the truth, we lived together without falling out. There were no poachers nor keepers then, only so many comrades, all bent on potting the enemy. And of a night-time, at the edge of the plain, you could hear the shots fired by our Prussian stalkers. Ah! one can rummage under the manure heaps in the farm-

yards. Plenty of bones will be found there, but not French ones."

Thereupon, with a wink and a silent laugh, the old keeper went off, striding through the shrubbery, and jerking his shoulder to raise the strap of his rifle, while the barrel glistened in the rays of the setting sun. On these occasions Pierre returned home at a less languid pace.

As he reached the house one evening, about the middle of March, he was astonished to hear someone talking in the drawing-room, for since their return no stranger had called at Bois-le-Roi. He went in and saw his mother, who was very pale, weeping, with her hand in that of a tall man with white moustaches, whose eyes were reddened by tears which he had with difficulty restrained. On seeing the young fellow the visitor opened his arms, and Pierre flung himself into them with a cry and a gesture of despair. The new-comer was the Count de Canalheilles, who had returned from captivity, and whose first visit was to the widow of his friend.

But few words were exchanged between the Count and Pierre. The General's son had had but little intercourse with Monsieur de Canalheilles. Whilst he was at college or at the École-Militaire he had but one day's holiday a week, and it was seldom that he saw the Count. Still the latter's name was constantly on General Séverac's lips, and as the son heard the qualities of mind and heart possessed by his father's friend extolled, he had naturally learnt to love him. The Count arrived at Bois-le-Roi with bad news but advantageous proposals. The Commune had just seized hold of Paris, and it was necessary to begin campaigning again. Monsieur de Canalheilles, who was placed at the head of a division of cavalry, offered Pierre the post of aide-de-camp. This offer was of too favourable a character not to be accepted gratefully. Cavalry would of all the branches of the service be the least engaged in this fresh siege of Paris; and if Pierre had been an ardent, passionate soldier whilst fighting the foreigner, he was but a saddened, mournful combatant in civil war. On the morrow he bade his mother good-bye and repaired to Versailles with the General.

Pierre promptly perceived that he had found a real father in the Count, and indeed the intercourse of this lordly soldier with his subordinate at once became most affectionate. Although the Count was desirous of furnishing his friend's son with opportunities of distinguishing himself, he watched over him with paternal care. It seemed as if he had promised his lamented comrade to treat Pierre like his own son. At times the young man's somewhat adventurous intrepidity caused the General great anxiety, and it happened on returning from some sharp engagement that he severely reprimanded him for going beyond the orders he had received. "You let my troopers be killed to no purpose," he grumbled in presence of everyone. "Be rather more sparing of these brave fellows' skins. You are well advanced and no mistake, now that you have caused them to have their heads broken uselessly."

If he had been frank, however, he would have said, "Pierre, my friend, you make me tremble; you go too far and you risk your life with foolish temerity." But as above everything else he was desirous of sparing the young man's self-esteem, and did not wish to appear to keep him sheltered from danger, he preferred to rate him soundly in presence of the whole staff. Thanks, however, to the Count's watchfulness and his own personal good fortune, Pierre came scathless out of the struggle.

CHAPTER II

As soon as the regular Government was master of Paris again, the Count reinstated himself in his superb mansion in the Faubourg St Honoré. On his arrival, he found that the house had been carefully pillaged, and in the grand drawing-room, destitute of furniture, he discovered irrefutable proofs of the Communists' good intentions. Cans of petroleum stood there, ready to set fire to the princely residence, and the rapid advance of the troops had alone prevented these destructive projects from being carried into execution. On the morrow of his arrival the Count

received a dozen anonymous letters denouncing the shopkeepers of the neighbourhood as the thieves who had carried off the property missing from the house; but suspecting some base attempts at revenge, he tore up these letters in disgust. Besides, in his opinion, those who denounced the theft were as ignoble as those who had committed it.

Life seemed extremely sad to the Count in this vast, cold and silent mansion. Almost all his friends were away from Paris. The old frequenters of the Tuileries Court had dispersed; and, half in ruins, and darkened by death, the city remained mournful and lugubrious. The Count spent his evenings with Pierre, and his friend Colonel Merlot, formerly of the Grenadiers of the Guard, who was a remarkable specimen of a stubborn old soldier. He was barely of the requisite height for a Linesman, but he possessed an athletic breadth of shoulders and a little brick-coloured head, with a rough bristling white moustache, and violet-tinged ears which betokened a fatal predisposition to apoplexy. Never in the memory of man had Colonel Merlot been seen in a good humour. Formerly married to a charming woman whom he had adored, although he made her most unhappy (she had indeed died somewhat of grief), the brave old fellow possessed an only daughter, to whom he had transferred the redoubtable affection which had so ill succeeded with the mother. As jealous of his daughter as he had been jealous of his wife, Merlot had sent Madeleine, when only ten years old, to the convent which Mademoiselle de Cygne, the Count's niece, had just then entered. And for eight years he had only granted the charming child an outing on the four great fête days of the twelvemonth. In his mind high walls and solid bars were the best precautions a father could take against the capricious fancies of young girls. Besides, he went to see Madeleine twice a week, covering her with selfish kisses, taking her dainties and gewgaws, and begging the good nuns to let her read even classical books as little as possible, for in his opinion women's imaginations opened quite quick enough, and it was useless to stimulate their minds.

Blanche de Cygne and Madeleine Merlot were of the same

age, and had become great friends. Having both lost their mothers, they lacked that warm affection which is as necessary to children as the sun to flowers. They had been drawn together, united like two sisters, and they had acquired the habit of thinking together, and of taking each other's advice before acting. During eight years they thus grew up side by side, consoling each other by their mutual presence whenever they saw their schoolmates go off joyfully with their parents on holiday occasions. Whenever Colonel Merlot went to the convent he requested that Mademoiselle de Cygne might be summoned to the visitors' parlour at the same time as Madeleine, and it was with stupefaction that he observed the physical development of these two children. Little by little they had become women. They were tall now, and Madeleine, who was buxom and dark-haired, overtopped her father almost by a head. They were about to reach their nineteenth birthday, and the time was approaching when it would be necessary to remove them from the convent. They had already finished their studies, and enjoyed relative liberty. At their own request they had been appointed to watch over the younger girls, and it was something to see them walking gravely round the playground surrounded by the little ones, who gaily hung to their skirts, and called them "little mamma." After witnessing this sight from the parlour window one day, Merlot, quite upset, went to the Count's, where, sinking on to a seat as though he were crushed by some frightful misfortune, he exclaimed :

"They are women, my dear fellow. Illusions cannot be entertained any longer. One of these days one will have to think of marrying them."

"What does that matter to me?" replied the Count. "It concerns that miser De Cygne. His daughter will be well provided for, and no mistake, if he undertakes to find her a husband himself. So long as he isn't obliged to disburse a dowry, he will take the first suitor who turns up, whether he have only one leg or one eye, or be a grey-beard. And yet he must be rich enough, the animal, by dint of putting money by."

The "animal" certainly was rich. Secluded in his old

mansion in the Rue de Bellechasse, he each year piled up his revenues with the sordid avarice of a bill-discounter eager for profit, stinting himself, and exclusively deriving happiness from his daily visits to the auction rooms in the Rue Drouot and the leading dealers in curiosities. Clad, winter and summer alike, in the same brown coat, he trudged along the streets with his umbrella under his arm, never taking a cab nor even an omnibus. He would loiter outside the bric-a-brac shops, with the keepers of which he was on familiar terms; and when he had found something suitable among the dust of the encumbered shop-front, it took him an hour to feel it, smell it, and examine it on all sides, before he decided to offer a price which amounted to less than a quarter of its intrinsic value. Then between the amateur and the dealer there ensued a fight in which every possible argument and device were resorted to. The Marquis let filthy Auvergnats tap him on the shoulder; nothing repelled him, providing he could only succeed in clenching an advantageous bargain. And when, after an obstinate discussion, he had worn out the dealer's resistance, he went off triumphantly, with his eyes sparkling, and pressing the precious specimen of majolica or the rare bit of ivory he had secured against his breast. He laughed to himself at the thought that he had so cleverly swindled those whose business it was to swindle other people.

The few amateurs who had been admitted inside his house declared that he possessed marvels. "When the Marquis de Cygne sells his collection," they said, "the Governments of Europe can send the directors of their museums to Paris. There will be some unrivalled objects to fight for. Most of the fine paintings which have passed into dealers' hands during the last forty years are now in his possession. His specimens of ancient and modern masters surpass those in the galleries of the Louvre. Each time that a Boyard who has lost heavily at play wishes to raise funds on his works of art, old De Cygne comes to the fore, as the dealers know. When it is worth his while he pays dearer than anyone else. And so he possesses Raffaelles, Teniers, and Ruysdaels, the copies of which in the Dutch and English galleries are mistaken for originals;

but they will not be worth more than their frames when the Marquis shows the genuine works, which flash upon you like pure diamonds."

Whenever Blanche's father met the Count de Canalheilles he crossed the street to avoid him, bending low, rounding his back, and looking at the tips of his boots as if he were seeking for halfpence between the paving-stones. He really dreaded his quick-tempered brother-in-law, for he recollected the terrible scenes which had taken place at the time of the Marchioness's death, when the Count reached his sister's bedside, over the prostrate body of the servant who opposed his entrance. The echoes of the old mansion still recalled the explanation which had followed between the two brothers-in-law. The servants who were listening pretended that the Count caught the Marquis by the throat, and called him an old scoundrel as he lifted him off the floor with his outstretched athletic arm. Since then De Cygne and De Canalheilles had not had the least intercourse together; and whenever they spoke of one another, the Marquis did so with somewhat timid coldness, and the Count with an air of repressed violence.

Monsieur de Canalheilles had thus never seen his niece; his knowledge of her was confined to what he heard Merlot say, on the evenings when the Colonel returned from the convent in a state of exasperation, with his ears swollen and as violet as plums. "Ah! the minxes!" he cried. "They are women, do you hear?—real women; and one of these fine mornings it will be necessary to provide them with husbands. They are pretty, too! It is almost improper! Ah! it would be something nice if they were not in a convent! All the men would be dangling round their skirts."

The Count shrugged his shoulders with a laugh, and, to tease his friend, replied, "Let them be; they are mere schoolgirls. No one would notice them!"

"Pooh! pooh! I know what I say. I know all about it," rejoined the Colonel; and taking his seat at the table prepared for the customary game of piquet, he snappishly added, "Cut."

However, Merlot's stories had ended by arousing the

Count's curiosity. Having remained a bachelor, not by hatred of matrimony, but by love of independence, he had reached old age without perceiving it. Events had greatly disturbed the worldly society in which he had lived, sought after and petted. The Imperial Court had disappeared, the foreign colony had dispersed, the royalist aristocracy, in the sulks with the Republic, was living on its estates in the provinces, and the Count, alone, wifeless and childless, loathing the emptiness of Paris, and shuddering at the thought of the vast, cold, tomb-like Chateau of Canalheilles, sadly asked himself during the long autumnal evenings if he had not spoilt his life. He now sometimes thought of this niece of his, whom he had so little cared for during twenty years. Altogether too proud to ask Merlot to bring Blanche to see him, for he feared it might be thought he was ready to abjure his family hates, he kept these new aspirations to himself. But his hatred of the Marquis increased. It was only to Pierre Séverac that he made some partial disclosures. During the long walks he took with his aide-de-camp in the Bois de Boulogne, while the brougham, drawn by two superb horses, slowly followed behind, an invincible impulse caused him to speak of his niece, and he let the young man discern what treasures of tenderness his heart contained. He evidently had a longing for a family life.

On reaching the Faubourg St Honoré one evening, Merlot, whose face was on fire, and who bristled more than ever, threw a large envelope on to the table. "Come, look at that," he said to the Count; "there's their photograph."

Monsieur de Canalheilles caught up the portrait with a lover's vivacity, and, approaching the mantelpiece on which the candelabra were burning, he became absorbed in mute contemplation. The two girls stood erect in their school attire, holding each other by the hand, and smiling softly. Madeleine, with dark hair, a smiling mouth, and a well-developed figure, had the robust grace of a girl of the middle classes. Blanche, who had fair hair and proud eyes, with something melancholy in her glance, stood in an easy, elegant attitude, such as befitted her aristocratic origin, and, despite her plain, unprepossessing convent uniform, it

could be seen that her figure was delightfully symmetrical. There was a pause of some duration; and Merlot beat a tattoo on the table and glanced threateningly at the Count, while the latter, leaning against the mantelpiece with his hands slightly trembling, seemed unable to take his eyes off his niece's portrait. He had become very gloomy, as if he were disturbed by painful thoughts.

"Well," roared Merlot at last, "what do you think of it?"

The Count heaved a sigh, and in an altered voice replied, "She is very like her mother." His eyes had become moist. With a hesitating hand he, as if regretfully, held the photograph out to Merlot, who, having replaced it in the envelope, abruptly thrust it into the depths of his pocket. As the Count saw this adorable likeness vanish, the thought came to him that he should never see it again save in memory, and he was on the point of exclaiming, "Pray, leave me that portrait." However, he did not like to display any such weakness, and after a great deal of self-reproof he tried to persuade himself that he really cared nothing at all about his niece. But he was not successful.

To change the current of his thoughts he thereupon plunged into work. He was a member of the Committee on the Re-organisation of the Army, and the task of creating a new military system, from first to last, was an immense one. Three times a week he repaired to Versailles, where the Committee met, with a bulky portfolio stuffed full of papers and plans under his arm. During the long hours he remained shut up in discussion with his colleagues the blood flew to his head, and he felt ill at ease. In fact, this office work, to which he had not been accustomed, made him suffer terribly; he longed for the open air; and as soon as the sitting was over, he hastened into the park to inhale the autumn breeze as it whirled the dead leaves round the open spaces decked in the centre with melancholy gods of marble. His herculean lungs, for which the heavy office atmosphere had not sufficed, dilated now, and he walked on, alone, gazing with delight on the broad expanse before him.

Sometimes, on returning to Paris, the Count took Pierre to dine at a restaurant, and they finished the evening at the

Théâtre des Variétés or the Bouffes, listening to a couple of acts of the last new piece. But the most comic scenes left the Count callous now. He no longer, as formerly, hummed the more easily remembered refrains. With a cigar in his mouth, and escorted by Séverac, he returned in silence along the boulevards to the Faubourg St Honoré. At one moment his health seemed seriously threatened. His changed life, the forced abandonment of familiar habits, the loneliness in which he was compelled to live, had all grievously affected him. He had grown thin. His ruddy complexion had left him. His cheeks were sunken, and his eyes retreated under his black brows. The Count, indeed, dragged incurable weariness about with him. His friends became anxious, and it was suggested that he ought to travel. At this juncture it happened that the Government wished to send a personage of rank on a special mission to Italy, and as Monsieur de Canalheilles's name and high connections abroad naturally designated him for the post, he set out, accompanied by Séverac.

As soon as the Count was outside Paris he breathed more easily. Far from the city, degraded by triumphant democracy and brutified by politics, it seemed to him as if he had emerged from under a pneumatic machine. The prospect of sojourning in Rome had gladdened his dejected mind, and his joyful gestures recalled those of a holiday-bound collegian. The elegant *viveur* appeared again as if by enchantment, and the man whom Séverac now had under his eyes was very different to the mournful, wearied, silent individual he had seen every day for long months. He recognised the nobleman whom his father had often mentioned admiringly as a most amiable companion and brilliant cavalier. The Count had grown younger again. His tall form, momentarily bent by ennui, rose erect once more. With a fur cap jauntily set on his head, and tightly clad in his long pelisse, he strode with a light foot along the platforms whenever the train stopped, glancing gallantly at the lady travellers, as they returned from the refreshment-room, lowering their veils over their cheeks reddened by the cold. And in the reserved *coupé* which the General and his aide-de-camp occupied, he did not weary of recounting his

earlier journeys. Particulars concerning the aristocratic society of Rome crowded upon his memory. Winter was delightful in the Eternal City. They would probably still be there at the time of the Carnival. And the Count already began forming plans. Séverac was unacquainted with Italy. His time had been so taken up by study and military duty that he had never been able to travel. His mind was quite fresh, and the feelings he experienced were extremely acute. He showed his delight with a frankness that enchanted the Count. The latter had regained an interest in life ; he piloted this big fellow, whom he loved as a son, and explained men and things to him with the keen intelligence of a nobleman familiar with art and letters.

Instead of crossing the Simplon, he had preferred to proceed to Marseilles, and thence journey along the coast. He wanted to show Nice and Monaco to Séverac, and enter Italy by the marvellous road of the Riviera. It was not requisite that they should reach Rome at any fixed date, and so journeying onward, gladdened by the sun which shone more warmly in the blue sky, with their blood quickened by the fresh balmy air of the flowery plains, they let themselves bask in present enjoyment, careless of arriving at the goal.

Séverac was extremely pleased with Marseilles. He was captivated with the gay aspect of the city, and amused by the animation of its inhabitants. He listened to the sing-song parlance of the women, smilingly admired their prodigal pronunciation, and fancied he was witnessing the performance of a vaudeville. Could anyone with such an accent be serious ? And yet they were so, these noisy busy traders, who met, exclaiming . "*Te*, so-and-so, adieu ! How goes it ?" and who then, with windmill-like volubility, and seemingly aggressive shouts, peacefully negotiated important business transactions. Vessels from Malta were moored alongside the quays in the port, and oranges fell in golden cascades on to the stone slabs. Round about the ships the water was covered with floating oranges. There were oranges everywhere, in and on everything, and the bright continuous yellow positively offended the eyesight. Some

passing children took a mandarine from a pile, and went off eating it without anyone reproving them. With such prolific abundance, indeed, artless marauders might certainly be allowed to take their share.

On the day after their arrival the Count decided to go with Séverac to Roubion's at the Reserve, so as to partake of the celebrated "Bouillabaisse," which everyone must taste, even if he subsequently confess that it is a dish worthy of the Borgias' *cuisine*. They were on their way to the restaurant, smoking a cigar, when suddenly a voice, which was quite destitute of any Marseillais accent, resounded in their ears :

"Eh ! my dear Count, where are you going like that ?"

The Count turned round and perceived a young man, attired in a brown and white check-patterned suit, with a grey felt hat on his head, a glass in his eye, and a light bamboo cane in his hand, who was looking at him smilingly.

"Why, it's the Sire de Bligny !" cried the General gaily. And then, after introducing Pierre Séverac, he added : "But you are not at Marseilles alone, my dear fellow ? The Duchess is with you, no doubt ?"

"No," replied the Duke carelessly ; "my wife has remained at Nice, with her father. Monsieur Moulinet, who decidedly possesses a vast mind, has undertaken some excavations at the foot of Mount Vesuvius. He has paid a sum of money to the Italian Government for an authorisation, and he hopes to enrich the French museums with a few Roman antiquities "

"Indeed ! Why, I thought that your father-in-law was a deputy ? Doesn't he attend the Chamber, then ?"

"He has asked for leave of absence. He is an excellent father, is Monsieur Moulinet, and he keeps his daughter company, as her tastes are somewhat sedentary."

"Whilst you ?"

"Oh ! I like motion, and am not bewitched with family life. Evenings spent in the peaceful glow of the homely lamp are without charms for me. At Capri I found a second-hand steam yacht which a Leghorn shipowner wished to get rid of. It was a bargain, so I bought it, and I am cruising along the coast."

"Alone?"

"Oh, you wouldn't have me do that, General," the Duke gaily rejoined. "Solitude is another thing which I am not madly in love with.—No.—At Genoa I found a party of charming English and American ladies."

"Second-hand, like the yacht?"

The Duke raised his hat, and gravely replied: "Excuse me, my dear Count, my companionship undoubtedly exposes these ladies to invidious remarks, but I can assure you that they are women of the best society. We all of us lunch together this morning on board the yacht, and I am now awaiting my folks, who have gone off to visit the Chateau Borelli. Join us, will you? I will introduce you, and you will spend the day gaily, for I can tell you that we don't exactly give ourselves up to melancholy."

"I ask nothing better," replied the Count. "Where do you intend meeting your friends?"

"At the port."

"Then let us go to the port," said the Count, and turning towards the young Duke, he added: "There must be a florist's in this place?"

"Certainly, but two steps off, at the corner of the Canebiere. Ah! Count, that's just like you, the last French knight! You cannot entertain the idea of presenting yourself before women with your hands empty. It is the old tradition—my father followed it—but these gallant customs are dying out."

He watched the Count as the latter went into the flower-shop, and then familiarly passing his arm through Séverac's, as if he had met in him a friend of twenty years' standing, he asked: "And you, Captain, do you give flowers to women, too? It isn't likely, eh? You content yourself with displaying your youth and your good looks. And you are quite right! But come, my dear fellow, I suppose you talk English?"

"Yes, Duke, I speak it passably," Séverac quietly replied.

"So much the better, for nothing is so annoying as to hear women chattering for hours in a language one doesn't understand. It always seems as if one were the object of their conversation, as if they were poking fun at one. At

least, I speak for myself," added the Duke graciously, "for you are not a man whom one can poke fun at from any point of view." Then taking a few steps forward, he hastily exclaimed: "Ah! here just comes the whole band! The ladies are almost punctual to-day! It is a miracle!"

A brake drawn by two vigorous post-horses was approaching at a rapid trot. On either side sat several women in light dresses, shading themselves with large blue and crimson parasols. A solemn-looking black poodle, with a silver collar round his neck, was perched on his hind-quarters beside the driver. The coloured dresses shone out bright and gay, through the dust which rose at each turn of the wheels like a golden cloud in the sunlight. The bells jingled, the whip cracked, and joyous bursts of laughter greeted the Duke, who stood nonchalantly waiting at the edge of the footway. The Count, with a rose in his button-hole, had already approached the step, and while extending one hand to assist the women in alighting, with the other he discreetly smoothed down their bulging skirts, so as to hide their well-shaped ankles from view.

"Eh! good-morning, cousin!" exclaimed a tall young man with a fair complexion, as he sprang to the ground and eagerly shook the General's hand.

"Dear me! It's true, of course. How forgetful I am!" said the Duke. "I didn't tell you that Pompéran was of the party. Why, General, you are among relatives. But dash it all, that may perhaps slightly spoil your pleasure——"

"By no means, I'm partial to Hector," the General answered, smiling at the fair-complexioned young fellow. "But are you alone here? Where is your wife then?"

And the General was already slightly frowning, when a dark, buxom little person, elegant, if somewhat short in figure, and clad in a robe of unbleached cambric, trimmed with Valenciennes lace, with plaited gloves of Swedish kid over her sleeves, tripped lightly forward, balancing a parasol in one hand, and a golden-rimmed pair of glasses, with which she was examining the Count, in the other. "What, General!" she said, "Hector without his wife? Such a thing has never been seen. It is the dear Duke who acts the widower——"

"The fact is, he has never been so much of a bachelor as since his marriage," interrupted Pompéran, with a laugh. "But for myself, I don't belong to that school, General. Mine is the old style, there is nothing modern about it. In one word, I represent the last faithful husband. A lost species, which coming ages will talk of as a most singular phenomenon!"

"But his conduct is by no means meritorious, cousin, for he loves me," observed young Madame de Pompéran vivaciously.

"And my love is reciprocated," Hector gaily rejoined. And careless of the crowd of idlers, which had already assembled beside the brake, the young fellow passed his arm round his wife's waist and kissed her heartily. Then they tripped off towards the boats humming a refrain, and linked arm in arm like a student and a grisette bound on a pleasure excursion.

The General, whose heart had been warmed by this spirited gaiety, was watching them smilingly, as if they had been the living prototypes of youth, but the sound of the Duke's voice suddenly roused him from his contemplation. "My dear Count, allow me to introduce my charming guests—Miss Sarah, the General Count de Canalheilles."

The Count had turned round, and he stood motionless, mute, entranced by the marvellous beauty of the girl who was smilingly saluting him. A face lighted up by greyish-blue eyes with black curved lashes, a forehead terminated below with finely traced chestnut eyebrows, and crowned above with luxuriant hair of the favourite Titian shade, a delicately chiselled little nose with palpitating nostrils, a mouth with pearly teeth and lips as ruddy as blood, an elegantly shaped flexible neck, whiter even than the spotless collar around it, broad shoulders and a slim waist—this is what the General had the leisure to admire. For a few seconds he remained as if petrified, as if in ecstasy. Emotion brought a flow of blood to his heart, which for an instant ceased to beat. A cloud passed before his eyes, and it was through a kind of haze that he beheld the delightful apparition which continued to smile on him. A thousand confused thoughts revolved in his

brain. For the first time in his life he was really aware of his physical decline. He cursed his old age; and like Dr Faust, in presence of the radiant beauty of Margaret, evoked by the tempter, he was ready to sell his soul for renewed youth. He felt that this adorable girl would have an influence on his life, and he was frightened. However, vaguely realising that his attitude was becoming inexplicable, he, at last made a great effort, bent low before Miss Sarah, and stammered a few words, the unexpected confusion of which proved more flattering than the most skilfully turned compliment.

The young woman gracefully extended a daintily gloved little hand, which the Count shook mechanically; then, saying, "General, my dear friend Mrs Stewart," she turned towards a tall withered old lady with a wonderfully blotched face, who wore one of those blouselike dresses and one of those bell-shaped hats which are the horrible specialty of English women on their travels.

The Count momentarily regained his presence of mind on finding this phenomenon of ugliness before him. But he swiftly averted his gaze, and stationed in front of Sarah, much like a pointer in front of a partridge, he allowed the Duke to present the other members of the party, listening to him but without hearing him. For the General, the lovely English girl was now the only being left at Marseilles, along the entire Mediterranean coast, in fact in the whole world. He had become very red, and making himself as attentive as a youth he took charge of a plaid, a little bag, and a pair of large glasses. When Séverac made an attempt to assist him and relieve him of some of these objects, he received him at the bayonet's point so to say, as if the young fellow by taking half his burden would have robbed him of part of the bewitching girl's gratitude.

However, after seeing that the attendants removed everything from the brake, the Duke de Bligny gave the signal for departure, and the whole party proceeded towards the port steps. The bouquets purchased by the Count were piled up near the prows of the two boats which were to convey the Duke's guests to the yacht, and as the Count embarked he took a large bunch of roses and gallantly

offered it to Sarah. With a smile she singled out a tiny bud, set it on her breast, and then with a negligent gesture let the bouquet fall into the boat at her feet. The Count thereupon swiftly took a seat in front of her, being almost on his knees and close to the roses which had been so proudly abandonod.

"Are we all ready?" asked the Duke, and then turning towards the rowers, he added, "Off!"

The boats sped through the troubled waters of the port towards the yacht, which rose up out of the brine, elegant of build and gay with bunting. The sky was azure blue, and the sun darted golden rays upon the glistening sea. As the boats glided between the tall hulls of the vessels with tapering masts, a strong healthy smell of tar was mingled with the saline emanations of the waves. It was one of those charming mornings familiar in this favoured region, when vague refrains rise to one's lips, and life seems so enjoyable. Influenced in some measure by the atmosphere and the surroundings, the Count sat absorbed in deep ecstasy, and looked at Sarah in silence. De Bligny, who was seated astern by the side of Hector de Pompéran, had noted with curiosity the rapid phases of Monsieur de Canalheilles's bewitchment. A mocking smile stole over his lips, and nudging his companion's elbow, he remarked in an undertone "I say, the General is dry wood, and no mistake. Did you see how he began to burn at Miss Sarah's first glance?"

"Oh, as you know, the men of sixty are all like that nowadays," replied Hector, in a bantering tone. "It's the strong generation that preceded us, the last troubadours! Everything for the ladies! that's their device. But they don't venture beyond preliminaries. They talk, that's all! Besides, they pretend that they are the only people who know how to talk nowadays."

"Sarah is very beautiful," muttered the Duke, shaking his head.

Hector looked at De Bligny attentively, and they exchanged a smile. "It's all the same to me," declared Pompéran; "I am not the Count's heir. But come now, who really is this Miss Sarah? For the last week you

have taken us about with her, and you treat her with all the deference due to a highly respectable young lady. I see that she is accompanied by a species of dragon whose face is as red as a coke fire. All that is perfect, no doubt. But I should like to be more precisely informed concerning her. Where does she come from? Who is she? And what does she do?"

"What you ask me for, is simply a complete biography," replied De Bligny. "Well, so be it. I will tell you what I know. Miss Sarah is one of those persons, placed in an exceptional situation, who are the object of exaggerated praise and exaggerated blame. Some envy and admire her, others are jealous of her and execrate her. Some will tell you that she is the natural child of an English prince and an Italian singer. Others will declare that she was born in a public-house at Wapping, and served sailors till she was fifteen, doing whatever their heavy fists bid her do, and getting frightfully intoxicated on porter mixed with whisky. You will be told that at Brighton she went with Batty into his lion cage to win a bet she made after tipping. You will find folks who affirm that she can neither read nor write, and that she employs Mrs Stewart not merely as a chaperon, but also to read the newspapers to her and keep her correspondence up to date. Finally, you will meet with persons in the best society, who if you repeat this gossip to them, will shrug their shoulders, smile disdainfully, and tell you that they have known Miss Sarah since her childhood, that she is the adopted daughter of an Irish lady of rank—Lady O'Donnor—that she was educated in one of the best schools in London, and that she is one of the most accomplished young ladies it is possible to meet."

"The deuce!" said Pompéran. "It isn't easy to see clear in such a mixture of contradictory information. However, it would seem from the most favourable statements that Miss Sarah is merely an adopted child."

"Say a foundling, my dear fellow," interrupted the Duke. "The charming girl does not try to conceal her origin, for she is frankness itself. But let us stop there, for the moment, if you are agreeable. We are reaching the yacht, and we shall have to attend to the lunch. After

dessert, while we smoke a cigar on deck, I will relate the rest to you, and if you can, you may form your opinion respecting this astonishing and captivating girl. At all events, I defy you to deny that she is one of the most adorable creatures it is possible to dream of."

The boat was now alongside the yacht, and the Duke and Pompéran rose to their feet. The passengers proceeded up the light side-ladder with a mahogany handrail, which furnished access to the vessel, and the Count, as light-footed and vigorous as a young man, showed every attention to Sarah, who accepted his services with a gentle smile. The young woman's elegant figure stood out proudly and gracefully against the light-tinted horizon, and as she leant on her closed parasol and tapped the boards with the top of her tiny, delightfully curved foot, while her golden hair sparkled under her large black-plumed hat, she seemed the radiant incarnation of youth in all its strength and beauty.

Four paces off, Séverac, who appeared out of sorts, was looking at the sea, to all appearance indifferent to the folks whose passing companion he had become, thanks to his General's fancy. The beautiful Englishwoman's eyes lighted for a moment on the young officer, whose proud masculine bearing was in striking contrast with the wearied demeanour of the *amateurs* surrounding her. He was soberly clad in a dark suit, with a blue white-spotted neckerchief tied negligently in a bow, which unpretentiously concealed half of his decoration. His bronzed countenance was firm and haughty looking, but there was a charming softness in his grey eyes. As if Pierre felt the weight of Sarah's glance he instinctively turned round, and his eyes met those of the lovely English girl. It only lasted for a second. Ill at ease, he slightly flushed and then averted his gaze.

"Does that gentleman belong to your suite, General?" Sarah suddenly asked, loud enough for the young officer to hear her.

"My aide-de-camp," the Count quickly answered. "A young fellow of very high merit, and whom I love like a son. Allow me to introduce him to you, Miss Sarah."

"As you please," replied Sarah, with careless impertinence.

The Count had motioned Séverac to approach him, and with a grave look the young officer bowed stiffly to Miss O'Donnor. "Monsieur Pierre Séverac," said the Count, "one of our most brilliant young officers, who bears a name which is illustrious in our army."

A cloud passed over Séverac's brow at this allusion to the father he so deeply mourned. Sarah slowly shook her head, as if to say, "It's understood your young friend is a phoenix," and then she indifferently let the one careless word, "Delighted!" fall from her lips. She did not even extend her arm, prompt as she usually was in shaking hands. It seemed as if a wall of ice had in one moment risen between these two young people, who an hour previously had yet been strangers.

They seemed to experience simultaneously the same violent irresistible antipathy for each other. Séverac drew himself up after bowing, and then walked away without saying a word. Sarah gave him an ironical glance as he went off, and muttered, "Far from amiable."

"Somewhat wild, perhaps," observed the Count, by way of rectification; but in the depths of his heart, which had unconsciously become selfish, he was delighted that Sarah should have received his young friend so coldly.

"Oh, it's of no consequence!" she added, with a gesture of disdain which was intended to show the Count that Monsieur Séverac might be whatever he pleased for all she cared; and then, taking the arm offered her by the radiant Count, she turned with a light step towards the awning beneath which the luncheon-table was spread.

CHAPTER III

SARAH had led a very hard life in her childhood. She was the daughter of one of those gypsy women who wander in bands from one end of England to the other, looking beautiful even in their filthy rags, bold and shameless to all appearance, and yet, such is their feminine pride, preferring theft to debauchery. The only home the child knew was

the picturesquely patched woollen tent under which her mother slept with her feminine companions heaped together. Her farthest recollections were full of alarming visions. She vaguely seemed to see a number of men who were threatening each other, and women who threw themselves in front of flashing knives. Then on certain days mysterious ceremonies took place, and strangely modulated songs resounded as an accompaniment to dances of barbaric rhythm. Golden sequins tinkled round the necks of the dancing girls, and the tambourines vibrated under their clenched fists. Then came a drinking bout, and the rejoicings ended in an orgy which stretched all the gypsies, men and women alike, on the striped carpets, as motionless as if they had been dead.

Later on, Sarah ran along the dusty roads of Ireland gathering yellow broom flowers and tufts of purple heather for nosegays, which she flung into passing vehicles. Sometimes a coin was thrown her in exchange, and she took it to her mother, who sat making wicker baskets on the bank of a ditch. Thus she journeyed on, scarcely pausing or reposing, with the band of gypsies that her mother, or rather the woman she called her mother, formed part of. They camped in the field, outside the towns, and towards evening they all went off in search of dry wood for the fire, water for the great copper cauldron which the leader carried on his back while journeying, and for potatoes to cook therein. These potatoes were stolen in the fields, and the gypsy leader was careful to cook them but partially, so that they might prove more difficult to digest, and stifle the cravings of hunger for a longer time.

One day, while Sarah was playing with a big black dog, on the grass outside the cottage of a village tinker who was mending the gypsy leader's cauldron, a lady, dressed in mourning, alighted from a travelling carriage close by. She stopped suddenly in front of Sarah, took her by the hand, and looked at her attentively with her eyes full of tears. Then opening a handsome gold box, she took a sweetmeat from it and gave it to the child. This was the first time that Sarah had partaken of a dainty. However, the lady in black heaved a deep sigh and entered a stylish-

looking house, the door of which was respectfully opened by a footman in full livery. Sarah began to play with her dog again, but she noticed that the lady was attentively watching her from a window. A few minutes later she emerged from the house in the company of a stout man with a red face and white whiskers. She went towards the child, and gently stroking her golden hair, she began to talk to her affectionately, while tears again streamed down her face.

Meanwhile, Sarah's mother had approached, and with lowered brow and threatening air, she took the child by the hand and drew her towards the camp. The stout man with the white whiskers thereupon muttered some disparaging remark concerning the rascally outcasts who did not even know how to appreciate the kindness of those who took an interest in them; and he then walked towards the gypsy leader, who was leaning nonchalantly against the tinker's door smoking a long Oriental pipe. An animated conversation began between them, and the leader soon took off his cap and bowed to the stout gentleman smilingly. The latter then drew a purse from his pocket and gave it to the leader, who curtly summoned Sarah's mother. When he had spoken a few words to her, she hastily stepped back and began to cry out, stamping her foot on the ground. But the leader spoke still more energetically, and raised his hand with a gesture of authority, saying, "She is not your daughter!" Thereupon the gypsy woman sat herself down on the ground, took little Sarah in her arms, and began to sob bitterly. The leader spoke again, and finally the woman, who was shedding a torrent of tears, unresistingly let Sarah be taken from her. The stout gentleman at once led the child to the travelling carriage in which the lady in mourning had resealed herself. With a cry of joy she passionately caught Sarah in her arms, kissing her fresh little face, and then the vehicle rolled rapidly away, leaving the companions of the child's infancy behind with all her past life of misery and privation.

The lady in mourning was Lady O'Donnor. A widow at thirty, she had, a few months before meeting Sarah, lost a little girl of four years old in whom she had centred all

her future hopes. Maddened by despair, she had hung between life and death during several weeks. In each crisis she clamoured for her little Nelly, declaring that she was not dead but had been stolen from her, and even asserting that it was her ruined brother, Lord Mellivan-Grey, who had kidnapped the child in hopes of inheriting her property. The Marquis of Mellivan-Grey had, in point of fact, been sincerely afflicted by his sister's grief, and greatly affected by her charges. He had done everything in his power to calm her, and failing to do so, he had retired to live on his Irish estates. By degrees, however, Lady O'Donnor recovered her reason; she was taken to the cemetery, and there, before the tomb wherein her little girl lay buried, she was obliged to reconcile herself to the cruel truth. There was now no reason why she should not make peace with her brother, and in fact she promptly decided to do so. She held the house in which her daughter had died in horror, and she left it, bound for Cork on a visit to Lord Mellivan-Grey.

The circumstances which seem to be the most favourable are often those that conduce to the worst results. This journey to Ireland, which was to have brought about a complete reconciliation between the brother and the sister, caused, in the upshot, their everlasting estrangement. While returning from Mellivan to Dublin, Lady O'Donnor met the little gypsy girl who was destined to take the place of the daughter she so bitterly mourned. Her ladyship subsequently stated that on first perceiving Sarah she had been struck by the very great resemblance between her and little Nelly. For a moment her previous suspicions resumed their hold upon her even more imperiously than before. She fancied that her own child was there before her in the flesh again, restored, as it were, by a miracle of Providence. Seized with this idea she sprang forward, but suddenly the remembrance of little Nelly's willow-shaded tomb recurred to her, and she bitterly bewailed her illusion, so swiftly dispelled. The stylish house she entered was that of her agent, Mr Purdy, a skilful man of business, who had succeeded in living on peaceful terms with the neighbouring peasantry, and had found a means of collecting her

ladyship's rents without reaping any bullets on his own account. It was he, clad in black, with a dignified air and a red face framed by white whiskers, who spoke to the gypsy leader and quietly offered a price for little Sarah as if she had been merely a fowl or a sheep.

The Marquis of Mellivan-Grey, who to all intent had just been reconciled to his sister, was highly displeased when he heard of the introduction of this four-year-old favourite into Lady O'Donnor's household. However, he set it down as a mere passing whim. He said to himself that some fine morning her ladyship would grow tired of her live toy and beg someone to rid her of the child for a handsome "consideration." But he was mistaken. Little Sarah was not merely endowed with great beauty, but with remarkable intelligence also. She charmed her benefactress's eyes, and occupied her mind. The bonds by which she linked Lady O'Donnor to her became each day more solid, and it was soon evident to everyone who approached her ladyship that Sarah had altogether replaced little Nelly in her heart.

The Marquis now fully realised the risks that his inheritance incurred, and he became extremely angry. Some very harsh words were exchanged in the course of a visit he paid to his sister, and he went off declaring that she would never see him again as long as she lived; to which she retorted that nothing would please her better. The Marquis was so enraged that he married the daughter of a wealthy brewer—a proceeding which by no means calmed Lady O'Donnor's irritation, for she was greatly infatuated with her noble origin. Her ladyship scorned this brewer's family, and the latter ardently espoused the Marquis's cause against that of the adopted child. Reports, in which truth and falsehood were artfully combined, then began to circulate through London. It was at first rumoured that when Sarah lived among her gypsy relatives she had been in the habit of dancing on the tight-rope at village fairs. Then it was asserted she had stolen the spectators' watches while taking round the plate for coppers, and she was generally described as a wonderfully artful intriguer who had speculated on the folly of a worthy but senseless woman in view of inducing the latter to adopt

her. All the slanders that were subsequently circulated respecting Sarah came from the same source, and so tenacious is human folly, so precious do the errors on which its gossip is founded seem, that these reports were never completely stifled.

However, the poor child had grown up under the care of her adoptive mother, and had become an adorable young girl. Instruction had greatly developed her marvellous intelligence, and so far as deportment and manners were concerned, the excellent lessons she had received made her fit to figure even in the most select society. The first time that Sarah appeared in Lady O'Donnor's box at Covent Garden her beauty caused a perfect sensation. Patti was singing the duo of *La Traviata* with Nicolini, but the audience ceased listening, every opera-glass was turned on the box, and for a moment the vocalists on the stage only saw so many backs in the stalls. Sarah caused a similar impression in London drawing-rooms, where numerous young men of the best families disputed for the honour of dancing with her. But she accepted their homage with graceful reserve, and knew how to keep her worshippers at a distance.

Sarah was then eighteen years of age. Before the season was over Lady O'Donnor had been several times asked for her hand. A peer's son, wealthy, handsome, witty and agreeable, came forward as a suitor, but he was repulsed like the others. Sarah answered all declarations by stating that she was not disposed to marry. She was determined to remain near her benefactress, nurse her when she was ill, cheer the last years of her life, and repay her in affection for all that she had done for her. However, Lady O'Donnor's heirs soon started a report that if Sarah rejected all proposals it was because she was already carrying on a love intrigue. It was asserted that she had several times been met late on wet nights in the Haymarket alone, on foot, and clad in a dark cloak. And yet, while this infamous slander was being hawked about, the young girl sat in a large arm-chair by the fireside in Lady O'Donnor's drawing-room, reading to her adoptive mother by the calm glow of a lamp which lit up her beautiful thoughtful face. Out of

doors the rain beat against the window-panes, and the roaring wind rushed along the dark streets ; and she who was depicted as hurrying to a lover's meeting was tenderly watching over the slumber of her white-haired benefactress, and restraining her breath for fear of awaking her

And yet Sarah was no gentle, indolent young girl. The hot blood of the gypsy race coursed impetuously through her veins. Bold and vigorous as she was, no one took a stream or a gate with more dash and composure than she did when fox-hunting in the autumn in the green plains of Ireland. The blood came to her cheeks and the azure of her eyes was darkened. With her lips compressed, and her eyebrows threateningly contracted, with an almost evil expression on her face, she dashed onward, intoxicated by the rapidity of her gallop, eager to cover space, and altogether abandoning herself to the impetuosity of her passionate disposition. She made it her pride never to shrink from an obstacle, and whenever she saw a companion disposed to avoid an embankment that seemed too high or a ditch that seemed too broad, she gave him a glance which at once restored all his wonted audacity. Lady O'Donnor felt alarmed at times when seated in her carriage she espied her adopted daughter galloping over the plains, dotted here and there with copses ; and at the first opportunity she bade her take care. The young girl proudly turned her head, and smiling at her benefactress, answered, " Don't be frightened." For a moment indeed she would moderate her pace, but soon seized with fever again she dashed on after the hounds, urging them on with her voice, and riding like a hardened huntsman.

She had thus become marvellously beautiful. When she passed by on her mare Polly, erect in the saddle, clad in a blue riding habit, the tight-fitting bodice of which showed what an admirable bust she possessed, with a grey felt hat on her sunny hair, and a gold-knobbed whip, with which she lashed the branches, in her hand, it was impossible to refrain from gazing after her. The usual companion of her rides was a beautiful black poodle, which she was passionately fond of. Sometimes with a sudden burst of tenderness she took the dog up by the head, pressed him to her bosom

roughly enough to make him whine, and then kissed him on his moustached snout. One day when young Lord Bilberry, who had drunk rather too much sherry at lunch, saw Sarah kiss her poodle in this fashion, he made bold enough to say to the friends around him :

“ A thousand guineas to be in the dog’s place.”

So far the young girl had not loved. Her heart was free and her dreams were peaceful. She jested, laughed, and amused herself like a child ; still, in all she did she evinced a violent, obstinate ardour which bespoke an energetic and imperious mind. She thus reached her twentieth year, thoroughly enjoying the life she led, and desirous of nothing more than the continuation of so much happiness.

But there came a clap of thunder in the clear blue sky. Lady O’Donnor suddenly died without having been taken ill, or without anything having presaged such an abrupt demise. Sarah’s grief was intense. She mourned her benefactress as if she had been her real mother, and she was watching over the needful preparations for the funeral when the Marquis of Mellivan-Grey arrived at the house and bade the young girl decamp. It was then that Sarah revealed all her firmness of mind and energy of disposition. She boldly resisted her benefactress’s brother, bitterly reproached him for his unseemly conduct, and finished by declaring that as long as Lady O’Donnor’s body remained in the house, she, considering herself her daughter, would not consent to leave it.

This odious scene, which the Marquis provoked at a few steps from the room where Lady O’Donnor’s remains reposed surrounded by flowers, was very severely judged, and public opinion, which had hitherto been favourable to Lord Mellivan, changed to Sarah’s advantage. On the morrow of her adoptive mother’s burial, and without waiting for the legal summons which his lordship would certainly have had served on her, Sarah retired to the residence of Mrs Stewart, a respectable elderly lady who had given her lessons in literature. Living in very modest circumstances under this worthy woman’s protection, she awaited the result of the lawsuit between Lord Mellivan and herself.

As at the outset the Marquis found himself in presence

of a formal act of adoption, he was satisfied that the action which he had brought could not be successful. His own solicitor had advised him not to prosecute the suit. He might raise various arguments—refer to his sister's asserted weakness of intellect, recall the symptoms of insanity she had displayed at the time of her daughter's death, bring forward the groundless charges preferred against himself—but nothing could prevail over the act of adoption in due and regular form which placed Sarah in possession of the same rights as a legitimate child. Realising that he was vanquished beforehand, and exasperated by the thought of losing the fat inheritance he had so ardently coveted, the Marquis determined by dint of scandal to compel Sarah to compromise. He paid various petty prints to attack the poor girl, whom he called "a highway adventuress," and to repeat the ignoble slander which so far had only been circulated in whispers. This pitiless, shameless campaign against a woman roused the indignation of honest folks, and violent discussions arose between those who looked upon Sarah as a hussy and an intriguer, and those who considered her to be a pure and spotless young girl.

The scandal became so great that Sarah determined to go abroad pending the finish of the lawsuit. Her enemies at once announced that she had joined the *demi-monde*, that she was coming out as a circus-rider in Paris, that an Austrian archduke was protecting her, and squandering immense sums on her behalf; but in point of fact she was living very quietly, in a simple little house at Mentone, under the guardianship of vigilant Mrs Stewart, and employing her time in making water-colour drawings which she placed at the disposal of the lady patronesses of charity bazaars.

Despite the efforts of her enemies, public opinion in London soon veered completely in her favour. The lawsuit, which was conducted with great warmth on either side, resulted in her thorough rehabilitation. Sarah's counsel, who was a most distinguished and eloquent member of the Bar, furnished full proofs of the slanderous practices which her adversary had resorted to, and judgment was delivered in her favour, Lord Mellivan being at the same time severely admonished by the Bench. Still, as is often the case, there

lingered a faint but persistent echo of all the infamous rumours that had been spread about, and some folks still shook their heads and thoughtfully remarked :

“ All the same, there is never so much smoke without a little fire.”

Having been placed in possession of her adoptive mother's immense fortune, Sarah conceived a hatred for England. It seemed impossible to her to return and live there; and so, attended by Mrs Stewart, who was like the dragon guarding the Golden Fleece, she began to travel over the Continent. She had in her blood that passion for rambling which leads the gypsy race to the four corners of the world. The free English education she had received facilitated, moreover, her movements, and she visited Holland, Germany, Spain, Italy, and Austria in succession. For three months during the spring she installed herself in Paris, in a handsome furnished apartment in the Rue de la Paix, and escorted by worthy Mrs Stewart she went about shopping, thoroughly renewing her outfit like a sailor about to return to sea. Then she went off to Trouville, Dieppe, or Arcachon, and lived there quietly enough. She received a limited number of acquaintances, and offered five o'clock lunch after the French fashion, and a cup of tea in the evening, when, evincing a great artiste's knowledge of music, she would often sing all the new airs in a wonderful voice, to the accompaniment of dear, modest Mrs Stewart, who, being very near-sighted, poked her long nose against the sheet of music, whilst her curls trailed over the keyboard. At times, however, Sarah suddenly ceased singing, a flame flashed from her blue eyes, she shut up the music book, tripped aside, and cried.

“ That's enough of grand Art ! Come, let us dance ! ”

Then taking some young swell's arm, she waltzed for hours with a kind of passionate madness. Flushes rose to her cheeks, she clenched her teeth, and feverish and violent, she fairly tired out five or six accomplished dancers. On these occasions her golden hair exhaled a more powerful perfume, her skin acquired a velvety lustre, and her motion became full of voluptuous languor. One could not approach her without experiencing a strange fascination,

There was something diabolical in her that disturbed one profoundly, a kind of phosphorescence as with the sea in stormy weather. On these evenings she maddened all the men who came near, and they went off intoxicated, with their hearts palpitating, and their minds upset. But when on the morrow, full of the impressions of the previous evening, they returned, Sarah was calm, and cold, and grave again, and they fell from the full height of their dreams and hopes. The young girl did not practise coquetry. These fits of frenzy came upon her unconsciously. Her original ardent and fantastic nature returned to her for brief moments, her passionate, fiery disposition was revealed by sudden fancies; but then her second nature, that which education had given her, obtained the upper hand again, and she ceased to be the irritating, intoxicating little gypsy, and subsided once more into a staid, decorous, young English lady.

Worthy Mrs Stewart was familiar with these singular attacks during which Sarah upset everyone around her. She laughed over them with her, calling them her electrical crises, and pretending that one received a shock merely on touching her as if some magnetic fluid escaped from her flesh. Then becoming serious, she said:

"There's no harm, my dear, so long as you are not in love. But the day you fall in love it will be terrible. Endeavour, Sarah, to make the man you love, love you." And with a maternal smile the old lady added, "Besides, how could a man be so deficient in taste as not to adore you?"

The beautiful English girl then wheeled round on her heel, and taking one of her old friend's curls in her hand, gaily replied:

"I fancy I have no heart, my dear Stewart, for I have never felt it beat. I shall soon be five and twenty; and, so far, I have never had any real affection for anyone, save my mother, you, and my poodle Jup. Is it natural? I have never had any desire to choose a husband among the delightful gentlemen who for several years have courted me so assiduously in the language of every country we have visited. They have all been too much occupied with them-

selves, too careful of their little persons, their little effects and little successes. They are pretty fashion plates all copied from the same model. They all bow in the same manner with the same jerk of the head; they all talk in the same hollow, commonplace style. They all ride skilfully on horseback and aim creditably at pigeon-shooting. Not one of them really rises above the others. They please me, no doubt, but I don't think about them. I am waiting for the lightning stroke, but I fear I shall never feel it. Besides, is it so very necessary that I should fall in love? Are we not very comfortable together? Is not our existence perfect? We enjoy complete independence. We go wherever we like, just as it suits our fancy; and all the year round we follow the sun, so that we never feel cold. Why not remain as we are, enjoy what we have, and let the rest take care of itself?"

"That is very philosophical," replied Mrs Stewart, "and for my own part, I don't think that my position could possibly be better. But it is impossible for you not to meet the man you will love, some day. And then, my dear Sarah, take care; with your nature it will be no trifling affair."

"Well, we shall see." And sitting down at her piano, careless Sarah began to sing in a loud voice the dreamy words of tender-hearted Margaret, slightly modifying them to suit the circumstances :

" Je voudrais bien savoir quel sera ce jeune, homme ?
Si c'est un grand seigneur, et comment il se nomme ? "

Then suddenly springing to her feet again, she exclaimed :

"Let us go for a breath of fresh air, Stewart. You make my head ache with all your flights of imagination. You are sentimental, my dear, and I'm sure that formerly you must have inspired more than one passion."

On hearing this Mrs Stewart blushed virtuously, so that her face, which was habitually scarlet, acquired the glow of a conflagration, and then she followed her young friend out of doors.

During four years the two women led the rambling life which Sarah delighted in so much, travelling by rail, by road, and by boat, going from north to south, from hotels to villas, dragging trunks and bags and plaids about with them, displaying all the irritating confidence of English travellers, and becoming as well known on the different lines as the inspectors of the companies themselves. Never any definite home, always a temporary one, in which they installed themselves luxuriously but imperfectly, settling down as carelessly as a dog stretches himself on the grass. What was the use of taking trouble and acquiring habits? They might perhaps start off again on the morrow. So they took things as they came, sleeping in the commonplace, unsavoury-smelling rooms of hotels, and feeling by no means astonished when they lighted on the hairpins which some lady had forgotten on the mantelshelf, or the cigar stumps which a masculine traveller had left beside the candlestick.

Naples had been their last halting-place, and here Sarah for one moment felt somewhat weary of rambling. The palace embowered in foliage, in which she established herself at Sorrento, prompted thoughts of a prolonged sojourn. There was a terrace with a balustrade of pink marble; and one evening in February, as Sarah heard the birds singing in the blossoming trees, she gave way to unusual languor. She remained pensive for long hours in front of the gulf, gazing fixedly at the white and red sails of the *balancelli* and *speronares* which darted over the turquoise sea, as light and as rapid as the wings of birds. In the distance, the water rose in spray round about the rock of Capri, and her eyes wandered dreamily from the sea to the far expanse of transparent sky. Stretched in a hammock, the young girl remained mute and dreamy for entire days. Mrs Stewart was astonished, but she respected her silence, and went on passionately perusing the love stories in the magazines with which she was always amply provided. One evening, however, Sarah uttered these words, which were perfectly stupefying, coming from a woman of her nature:

“Life is pleasant here. Let us buy this place and make ourselves at home.”

Mrs Stewart was not easily astonished, but she now

lost all her customary phlegm. She rose vivaciously, and approached Sarah to see if she were well awake. The girl's eyes were certainly wide open, but her mind was no doubt slumbering. The old lady anxiously asked herself what could have changed Miss O'Donnor's ideas so suddenly and so completely. As her health was excellent, she fancied that she had perhaps fallen in love with some handsome Neapolitan nobleman. She rapidly made inquiries in that direction, but without any result; and in the meantime Sarah's condition was becoming very much worse. She had procured a collection of poetical works, and cast aside the joyous operetta music, which she sang so brilliantly, to study more serious compositions. It was quite a revolution, and Mrs Stewart, whose pliancy of character was remarkable, was already preparing to sacrifice on the altar of reverie and sentiment, when there came another complete change.

The Duke de Bligny had just reached Naples with his steam yacht. He met Miss Sarah buying filigree bracelets on the Chiaia, and having unfolded to her his project of cruising along the coast of Italy and France, he suggested she should form one of the party—a proposal she accepted with childlike glee. She swept back to Sorrento like an avalanche, turned the palace topsy-turvy, threw the serious music and the elegiacal poems into the same travelling-bag, and stupefied Mrs Stewart by the spectacle of her overflowing delight.

"But what was the matter with you during the last few days?" the worthy lady ventured to ask.

"I? nothing; I was melancholy, now I'm gay. Contrasts, Stewart, always contrasts; such is the law of life. All right, and now forward!"

Embarking two days later on board the yacht, Sarah became the promoter of every kind of amusement. At her suggestion a ball was given on board when they reached Nice, and the Duke invited the officers of the man-o'-war, the *Revanche*, which was anchored in the roads. The deck was illuminated with the electric light, and so cleverly decorated with evergreens and flowers, that it looked like a garden; and the elegant ladies from the coast danced till dawn under a purple awning, which was but faintly stirred

by a light breeze. Sarah once more met with all the worship she was accustomed to. The brilliant naval officers, the elegant Parisian *viveurs* sojourning at Nice, crowded round her, but in vain. The beautiful Englishwoman danced, talked, and flirted, but none of her admirers were favoured more than the others. And certainly it seemed as if Sarah were bent on remaining an old maid, when, on the quay of Marseilles, she became acquainted with the Count de Canalheilles and his aide-de-camp, Pierre Séverac.

CHAPTER IV

IN Paris one morning at about nine o'clock, Colonel Merlot, freshly shaved, had just lighted an excellent cigar and was beginning to read his favourite, *Figaro*, when his attention was attracted by ten lines of society gossip in which he espied a very familiar name. The paragraph ran as follows :

“ A Grand Marriage. We hear that the General Count de Canalheilles, the last descendant of a most illustrious house, is on the point of renouncing celibacy to marry an adorable and wealthy Englishwoman, Miss O'Donnor. The General is now at Rome on an official mission, and it was in the high society of the Eternal City that he lately met this charming young lady, who will be one of the queens of our Parisian fêtes next winter.”

Merlot was dazzled. What ! De Canalheilles, his old friend, guilty of such a piece of folly at sixty-four years of age ! And for whom ? For a foreigner met in some commonplace drawing-room ! Was it possible ? The Colonel again took up the newspaper, which he had dropped in his stupefaction, and read the paragraph once more. There was no mistake ; everything was clear and precise. The statement concerned the General now on a mission in Rome ; and besides there was only one De Canalheilles in existence, for the Count was the last of his race. If lightning had struck the house, or if Mademoiselle Merlot had eloped from her convent, the Colonel could not have been more upset. He threw away his cigar, and began

pacing his study, taking six steps up and down for a couple of hours, during which time he covered a distance of two leagues without leaving the room.

Merlot reflected during this mad but restricted locomotion. And so even the General, with his clear, far-seeing mind, could be blinded to such a degree! The first hussy that passed by could do it! She had done it—this Englishwoman, whom he had met in a flash drawing-room at Rome—an adventuress, no doubt, a frequenter of watering-places, one of those big girls with yellow chignons twisted in the form of a figure of 8 behind their heads, who go from Trouville to Monaco, from Monaco to Naples, and from Naples to Paris, carrying a vague smell of waiting-rooms about with them as the result of incessant travel! To think that De Canalheilles, the brilliant nobleman, who had lived such a fast life, and who had met with so many gallant adventures, should allow himself to be trapped into marrying just like a simpleton, like a hobbledehoy! For there was no doubt about it. A trap had been laid for him. The Englishwoman had evidently been tempted by the General's high position and immense fortune.

But at this point Merlot was obliged to pause. The newspaper paragraph anticipated his slanderous suppositions. It specified that Miss O'Donnor was both adorable and wealthy. Adorable! Then De Canalheilles might have been captivated, and therefore married for love. Wealthy! Then the Englishwoman did not marry the Count for his money. But in that case why did she marry him? Had the Count still the pretension of inspiring a passion? Merlot paused in front of the looking-glass and gave it a glance. The figure he beheld, which was his own, seemed so far from being a captivating one that he could not admit that a man eight months older than himself should have conquered the heart of an adorable, wealthy girl at the point of his moustaches, even admitting that she was English and consequently eccentric. He said to himself that there must be some mistake in the announcement; that the writer had been misinformed; that Miss O'Donnor was no doubt charming—in fact all adventuresses are so—but that as for wealth she could have none. And thereupon he paused,

decided and declared that his friend was the greatest dupe of modern times. He halted abruptly in his perambulation and burst out into pitying laughter. To think that De Canalheilles, the Don Juan who had once humiliated him by his conquests, the brilliant, smiling, elegant nobleman, whom pretty women had run after, should end in such a lamentable fashion, and marry a child when he was almost in his dotage !

Suddenly the Colonel's countenance changed, he struck his forehead forcibly with his hand, and all the blood in his veins rushed to his cheeks ; he looked as though he were about to explode, and then, after a moment of anxious meditation, exclaimed in a joyful tone .

“ By Jove, yes, that's what it is ! What a fool I was ! The papers are always up to such tricks. It's not true, it's a hoax.”

And in a harsh voice the Colonel, in his great satisfaction, began to hum out of tune to an air from an operetta then in vogue,

“ 'Tis a canard, broum, broum, 'tis a canard ! ”

But as it was not in the Colonel's nature to be satisfied, even when he had reason to be so, he frowned ferociously, and feinting a terrible thrust with his forefinger, added :

“ Until the ears of some of these gentlemen of the press are cropped, the private life of respectable people will be at the mercy of such tattlers. I should like one of these rascals to write a line about me. By Jupiter, he should see what sort of stuff a Colonel of the old Imperial Guard is made of ! ”

So saying, Merlot had donned his overcoat ; he put on his hat with a martial air, cast a terrible look at his reflection in the glass, and taking his gold-headed cane, set out, as was his custom every morning, to breakfast at the Café du Helder. He descended the stairs, still humming—

“ 'Tis a canard, broum, broum, 'tis a canard ! ”

And he directed his steps to the nearest télégraph office. He entered with a jovial air, and took up a printed form to write his message on. Noticing an old gentleman with a

portfolio stuffed with papers under his arm, who was writing at a high desk, he waited a few minutes, and then, losing his patience, began to growl at people who monopolise the pens intended for the use of the public. The old gentleman, in a mild tone, remarked to Merlot that the pen in question did not belong to the office, but to himself. He offered it courteously to the Colonel, who took it with a sulky air, and as though he himself were conferring a favour on the obliging unknown. Then, in a large handwriting, stiff and angular like his own character, he wrote these words :

“Canalheilles, Doria Palace, Rome, Italy. Learnt approaching marriage through *Figaro*. Much amused. Could not think you such a fool. Merlot.”

Having so well utilised his twenty words, he gave back the pen to the old gentleman, who was waiting for it in order to take his departure, did not reward him by a word of thanks, paid, and laughing in his sleeve at the astonishment of the Count on receiving his telegram, went off to discuss scrambled eggs with truffles and a *filet saute*, washed down by a capital bottle of Pontet-Canet, with the freedom from indigestion of a man without cares.

It was Thursday, however, and on that day, at about four o'clock, it was the Colonel's custom to go to the Convent of the Sacred Heart to see his daughter. He used every week to call on his way at Boissier's, ask one of the shopgirls to do him up a bag of mixed sweetmeats, and punctually, at the appointed hour for visits, present himself before the nun on duty and ask to see Mademoiselle Merlot and Mademoiselle de Cygne.

On the present occasion he thought that the nun, on hearing his request, looked sad. It gave him, vulgarly speaking, quite a turn; he thought all at once that something might have happened to his daughter; and, in a choking voice, he exclaimed—

“What's the matter?”

“You can only see Mademoiselle Merlot, sir, to-day,” answered the nun; “Mademoiselle de Cygne left the convent this morning.”

"Left the convent?" cried the Colonel, with a terrible look. "What? Left the convent?"

And his evil imagination at once setting to work, he already saw an elopement, an abduction, gallants scaling the garden walls, and bearing off Mademoiselle de Cygne, despite her despairing cries. Why was not he there? They would have seen how he could protect virtue, and put audacious ravishers to flight.

The Colonel roared with such violence that he astonished himself, and had the vague notion that in this quiet convent reception-room he had perhaps spoken rather loudly. But what was not his astonishment, when the nun answered him in the calm voice of one indifferent to the miseries of this life:

"Mademoiselle de Cygne's father died this morning, and we have sent the dear child, under the care of one of our sisters, to pray beside him."

Merlot's blood, which had been bubbling like the lava of a volcano, grew suddenly calm. The Marquis was dead. There was really an important event.

The Colonel's selfishness spoke first; Mademoiselle de Cygne would doubtless leave the convent, and Madeleine would remain there alone, abandoned by her friend. Could he, under these circumstances, leave his daughter there any longer? He did not think so, and saw himself, with terror, threatened with the immediate presence of his daughter in his bachelor establishment. He pictured to himself in a moment all his habits modified, his cherished mode of living disturbed, and his sweet liberty destroyed, without speaking of all the uneasiness, all the cares that the difficult task of watching over a young girl would entail on him.

Madeleine's arrival cut short these doleful reflections. The charming girl threw herself on her father's neck, and burst into a torrent of tears. Her heart, swollen with grief since the morning, now freely overflowed. The Colonel, upset by the sight of this grief, made his daughter sit down beside him, and, with his eyes fixed upon the ground, kept murmuring mechanically:

"Come, Madeleine, come, come."

He could not think of anything else to say to her.

When Madeleine grew a little calmer, the Colonel had to submit to an avalanche of words. Certainly Monsieur de Cygne had not been a very tender father; he did not often come to see his daughter, and did not trouble himself much about her; but, after all, he was her father, and now he was gone Blanche had no one's affection to reckon on in the world, except on that of her friend—of her veritable sister, Madeleine. And Mademoiselle Merlot, with a fresh burst of tears, related to her father all the delicate kindnesses of Blanche, and how she had softened for her the bitterness of her cloistered existence. What would have become of her without her friend? And now the chances of life were perhaps to separate these two inseparables.

The Colonel, who had begun by making a face—all that his daughter had said about the Marquis de Cygne being equally applicable to himself—ended by being touched with emotion. Madeleine's moving words softened the hardened casing of his old heart, and he had to angrily brush away with the end of his glove a tear that was tickling him terribly in the corner of his eye.

"But," said he, "Mademoiselle de Cygne is not alone in the world, my dear child; she has her uncle, the Count de Canalheilles, my old friend. He is a splendid-hearted man; he will watch over Blanche, who will legally pass under his guardianship. You will not be separated from your friend; you will see her at the General's when you like."

This prospect somewhat calmed Madeleine. But a thought saddened her again; her friend was far from her at the very moment when she had most need of her consolation and encouragement. Leaning against her father's shoulder, with her soft lips to his rough, purple ear, she was already beseeching him. If he would only take her to the Hotel de Cygne what a pleasure it would be to Blanche. And then she was without support, without advice, abandoned to herself, having perhaps to discuss matters of grave moment with strangers. The presence of a man, above all of a man full of authority like the Colonel, would, without doubt, have considerable effect. People are so often impolite when they have only a woman to deal with.

At these words Merlot drew himself up like an old

charger who hears the trumpet; his eyes flashed fire. The idea of having wrongs to redress, someone to annoy, electrified him. He would like to see anyone trying to intimidate the niece of a friend of Colonel Merlot. By Jupiter, he was there, and he would soon teach them!

"You are right," he said, "our place is with Blanche; you to console, I to defend her. We will ask the Mother Superior for leave for you to go out, and we will start."

A quarter of an hour later a cab brought Madeleine and her father to the Rue de Bellechasse.

The Hotel de Cygne, abandoned to neglect through the sordid avarice of the Marquis, was a large building of noble elevation built under the Restoration, and having a courtyard in front and a garden in the rear. The grand entrance, which had not been opened for twenty years, was flanked by two tall stone pillars green with damp. In the courtyard grass grew between the paving-stones. On the shutters on the front of the house the dust, moistened by rain, had formed a kind of black crust. The Hotel was reached, not by the magnificent flight of steps ornamented with marble vases long since void of flowers, but by the servants' entrance. A bewildered porter, half deaf, the only servant the Marquis had retained, and who never put his own feet inside the house, consented, after a prolonged argument, to let Colonel and Mademoiselle Merlot in.

On the ground floor, the father and daughter passed through a series of rooms plunged in semi-obscurity, and on the walls of which hung a large number of pictures in gilt frames. In every corner paintings were piled on the ground. In the middle of the rooms stood open packing-cases, the straw from which was strewed about the flooring. There was scarcely space to pass through all this lumber.

Madeleine and her father groped their way up a little staircase, and on the first floor reached a boudoir which had served as the Marquis's study. Two cries were heard simultaneously, and Blanche and Madeleine were locked in each other's arms. A door opened noiselessly. The nun who had accompanied Mademoiselle de Cygne appeared on the threshold, grave and silent. And through the half-open door, in a large, severely furnished room, Merlot

perceived, by the solemn light of the tapers, the body of the Marquis laid out on a handsome bedstead of carved wood.

Death had lent to his face an expression of calm grandeur that it had never worn during life. The collector seemed to slumber happy and calm, surrounded by his choicest gems. Merlot's glance, turning from the bed, rested on the walls of the room hung with the finest specimens of Italian and Dutch masters. On tables and in glass cases were masterpieces of Dresden and Sevres porcelain, carved ivory work of inestimable value, Limoges enamels, German stoneware, majolica of Castelli and Gubbio, unique in the purity of their colouring.

Attracted despite himself, forgetting the respect that was due to the dead, the Colonel began to walk about the room, examining the exquisite fans painted by Lancret and Watteau, the golden caskets chased by Ghirlandajo, the sword hilts due to the talent of the cleverest workmen of Spain. Merlot was no connoisseur, but everything he had before his eyes was so beautiful that he went on examining, fascinated, uttering low exclamations. And in his alcove, transformed into a mortuary chapel, beneath the light of the tapers that shone on his pale brow, the Marquis seemed to smile, as if the naive admiration of this visitor had caused a supreme joy to the collector asleep for ever.

The sound of voices in the next room aroused the Colonel from his contemplation. He instinctively drew near the door. Standing before Mademoiselle de Cygne, in the centre of the little parlour, a fair young man, dressed with great care, and kid-gloved, was pouring forth expressions of regret. The Marquis had been a real friend to him; not a week had elapsed for many years without their meeting, and always with renewed pleasure. He was besides a man of such keen judgment, the Marquis, of such sure and delicate taste. Examine his collection of pictures; it was full of gems, and it was certain that in it the family possessed a treasure.

And as Mademoiselle de Cygne, astonished and uneasy, tried to cut short his flood of words by exclaiming:

"Pardon me, sir, I do not think the moment very opportune——"

"Opportune, mademoiselle!" said the elegant visitor, starting off again with increased volubility, "nothing could be more opportune. Monsieur de Cygne is known in the Paris, London, Vienna, and St Petersburg markets as one of the first collectors in Europe. The report of his death will spread like wildfire; all the amateurs will be bitten with curiosity, they will certainly come from every part——"

"But, sir," again interrupted Mademoiselle de Cygne, growing somewhat pale, "of what are you speaking?"

"Of the sale, mademoiselle, of the splendid sale of your lamented father's gallery. Perhaps you have no idea that there are twelve million francs' worth of pictures here. You can believe me, for I am not a bad judge of them."

"To whom, then, have I the honour of speaking?" asked Mademoiselle de Cygne coldly.

"Yes, who are you, sir?" said the Colonel, abruptly opening fire like an unexpected reserve coming up in the middle of a battle.

Mademoiselle de Cygne's elegant interlocutor bestowed one of his most pleasing smiles on Merlot, and flipping the end of his cravat with the consequential air of a man sure of the effect that his name will produce, replied:

"Tristrame, expert, picture dealer—well known—Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin. I shall do myself the honour to call again, mademoiselle. I should be extremely vexed to appear indiscreet."

"It's about time to think of that," answered the Colonel. "There is your way, sir," and he pointed to the door. "Excuse me if I do not see you out."

"You are too kind," murmured the dealer, with the smile of a man accustomed to consider rebuffs as the inevitable accessories of large transactions. And gracefully swinging a cane with a gold head set with sapphires, he bowed and retired.

"You see, papa, how useful you are, and how well it was you came," said Madeleine to the Colonel. "When there is not a man in the house intruders soon grow bold."

"Exactly; so we are going to stay, my dear child," answered Merlot energetically. "There are no servants here, I have only seen that idiot of a porter. I will send

for my batman by a commissionaire. Till the Count de Canalheilles arrives we will be Blanche's real family."

Madeleine threw herself on the neck of her father, whose unaccommodating disposition she knew so well how to manage.

"I shall take up my quarters below," he added; "and if any fresh joker turns up, out he goes in a jiffey."

And turning towards Mademoiselle de Cygne, who was standing erect, her hand resting on the mantelpiece in a graceful attitude, which set off her slender and elegant figure under the heavy folds of her uniform, he said:

"Rely on me, my dear child, I won't abandon you in your trouble."

The young girl smiled sadly; two tears welled from her eyes, and she sank back dejectedly on the couch beside Madeleine.

The death of her father, whom she had, however, known very slightly, and whom she had little cause to love, had thrown Blanche into a state of deeply painful agitation. It seemed to her that an immense gap had been suddenly formed in her existence. Accustomed to the methodical tranquillity of convent life, she had since the morning gone through such varied emotions that the few hours which had just elapsed seemed to her to have lasted an infinite while. Stunned, her mind vacant, her nerves cruelly shaken, she sat inert, not knowing what to do, and listening without answering to her friends' kind words.

A deep silence reigned throughout the Hotel, the sound of the vehicles rolling over the pavement of the street only penetrated but faintly through the vast courtyard. The fire burned with a ruddy glow in the tall chimneypiece, and cast sudden gleams in the semi-obscurity of the room. Whilst through the half-open door, the tapers, burning with an odour vaguely suggestive of a church, shed their pale rays amidst the broad daylight of the mortuary chamber. Oppressed by this lugubrious silence, and by the funereal solemnity of the apartment, the two young girls no longer spoke. Hand in hand they pursued the train of their thoughts, vaguely listening to the regular and monotonous ticking of the clock, which, heedless of the dead, continued to mark the passing hours.

The Colonel had been well inspired in taking up his post on the ground floor. Without a real Cerberus, like himself, Mademoiselle de Cygne would have been assailed by a swarm of callers, always troublesome and often odious. In Paris, as Merlot was aware, the news of a death spreads with surprising rapidity. Within two hours of the death of a relative one finds oneself assailed by propositions from numerous individuals who live exclusively by death. It is first the mourning stationer who arrives with his prospectus on which the tariff of black-edged letters announcing the decease, with or without distribution by special messengers, is printed, with the price by the hundred and the thousand. Then comes the undertaker, who extols his goods, suggesting oak, which is twice as dear as pine, but wears much better. Above all, he will push the leaden lining which he cannot recommend too highly. A brass plate, with the name engraved thereon, costs twenty-five francs, with a coat-of-arms, fifty; but this is very good form.

Following this respectable tradesman comes the embalmer, who breaks out into a dissertation on the advantages of the process. And if, sickened by the precision with which he enters into details, you push him to the door, he winds up by suggesting just a little disinfecting fluid in the interests of the survivors. Then the monumental mason, an artist, with rolls of paper under his arm, calls to submit a few elevations of tombs in marble, stone, or even brick. And finally the newspaper reporter, a real literary undertaker, who for a small remuneration will undertake to get flattering obituary notices inserted in the leading papers. All these people, got up especially in black as if they were in mourning for the possible "customer," speak at first in low tones with sugared mien; but when one tries to get rid of them, they raise their voices in the hope of attracting some member of the family, in order to make a supreme effort to trade on grief. And of these people who live by death ten had called, one after the other, impudently offering to make reductions and concessions, and insinuating with a smile that if they are sent away it must be because arrangements have been entered into with so-and-so, the rival firm,

but that this will be speedily regretted, for there is not a worse house in Paris.

Merlot received the first of these traders with mistrust, the second with rudeness, and slammed the door in the face of the third. From that moment, surly as a watch-dog, the Colonel was no longer approachable. The mere sound of the entrance door opening made him growl, and in a jiffy, as he had told his daughter, the intruder was sent about his business.

Walking up and down like a sentry on duty, Merlot mechanically pushed open a door and found himself in a vast hall, with vaulted roof and stone pavement, that must have formerly served as a kitchen. There an incredible accumulation of furniture offered itself to his eyes. Piled up one on the other were Renaissance coffers with their elegant fronts, fifteenth-century sideboards with their delicate ornamentation, carved chairs, fourpost bedsteads, cabinets, arm-chairs, tapestry-covered couches, and what-nots of the eighteenth century showing Reisener's finest handiwork; clocks of all shapes and styles, from the Gothic timepiece to the Louis Seize dial, including the two styles of boule in ebony and brass, and tortoiseshell and brass, with elegant and pure models of the time of Louis Treize, and charming specimens of *rocaille*. In this veritable old curiosity shop caked dust covered all these precious objects piled up pell-mell. On a marvellous table in marqueterie of the finest Italian workmanship was placed a heavy pair of fire-dogs in hammered iron. A mace had fallen from a trophy composed of weapons upon a charming little round table in vernis martin, and had split it. Chinese porcelain of the highest value lay on the ground amongst the legs of a spinet, the panels of which had been decorated with bouquets of flowers signed Baptiste.

The Colonel, stupefied at the sight of all this wealth, advanced with precaution amongst the serried piles of furniture, doubling the cape of a coffer, to find himself hemmed in by easy-chairs and screens. He had before his eyes the overflowings of the Marquis's collection, the trifles, the articles of furniture or pictures of which one possesses two or three specimens already, and which are put on one

side till they can be exchanged for something sought for and not in one's hands.

From this vast hall Merlot, led on by curiosity, passed by a little staircase to the dining-room, a large and lofty apartment panelled in oak, relieved with gold lines and hung with Gobelins tapestry representing hunting subjects after Oudry. Sideboards of carved pearwood were laden with whole services of old china of the greatest rarity. The centre table was covered with a cloth of Genoa velvet that had formerly adorned some sumptuous patrician residence. At the windows hung curtains of old guipure lace blackened by age; whilst the coved ceiling was ornamented with a fine painting from the brush of Prudhon representing the "Triumph of Venus."

At each step there was some fresh marvel. But, with a taste for beautiful objects carried to positive mania, the Marquis had lived like a pauper in one corner of his magnificent dwelling. A species of unhealthy avarice had hindered him from deriving any enjoyment from the many artistic treasures he had been able to gather together. He had only had the pleasure of acquisition, not that of possession.

The Colonel, his eyes dazzled as in a museum, was slowly returning to the little anteroom that served him as a post of observation, when, in the darkness of the passage, he almost ran against a stranger who was cautiously advancing.

Merlot uttered a low growl, and forcing the new-comer to draw back,

"Who do you want?" he asked gruffly

"Mademoiselle de Cygne," answered the intruder, a short and rather stout young man, with a full and merry face framed by auburn whiskers.

"Mademoiselle de Cygne cannot be seen," retorted the Colonel, pointing to the door.

The young man started, and making a step forward, said:

"Pardon me, sir, it is indispensable that I should see her."

"The order is no admission. She may surely claim the right of weeping quietly without being disturbed by the first comer."

"Pardon me again, sir," said the young man, smiling, "but I am not exactly the first comer."

"And who are you then?" asked Merlot, with flashing eyes.

"The notary of the late Marquis de Cygne."

"You?"

And Merlot, full of suspicion, looked his interlocutor in the face, and scrutinising his joyful physiognomy, said to himself: "A notary? And that age? The joker is not more than thirty. Do they take them as beginners from the breast now? Bah! Some clerk, at the most, who has come to bother Blanche by asking for idle information or useless papers. No nonsense—off you go, like the others!"

"But, pardon me," resumed the young man, "it is doubtless to a member of the Marquis's family that I have the honour of speaking?"

"Colonel Merlot, sir, charged with hindering Made-moiselle de Cygne from being pestered to death with absurd propositions. So, you understand——"

And the Colonel again pointed to the door.

"Perfectly, Colonel; let me congratulate you on the strictness with which you discharge your duty. My young client is fortunate in having friends on whom she can depend. I will congratulate her upon this."

And passing between the Colonel and the wall the young man began to mount the stairs, followed by Merlot, shouting:

"Sir, you are trifling with me. Stop! I tell you no one is to go up."

The old soldier made an effort, but, more agile than he, the young man had already reached the first floor. And there losing his legal gravity, breathless from this steeple-chase and red with anger, he exclaimed:

"Ah! come now, Colonel, you are abusing my patience, and I shall——"

The door of the little room opening cut short his remarks. Madeleine, somewhat uneasy, but grave and self-possessed, stood on the threshold. Her blue eyes rested on the new-comer, and, turning to the Colonel, she asked:

"What is the matter, father?"

At the single word "father," the young man, who was on the point of roundly admonishing the Colonel, bowed respectfully, and his mouth only found soft words for him to whom this charming girl belonged.

"Excuse me, sir, I beg. Perhaps I have not said enough to convince you?"

And bowing towards the young girl, he went on:

"Leopold Frossard, successor to Maître Bonchamps, notary of the late Marquis de Cygne and of the Count de Canalheilles."

Merlot grumbled some indistinct words. In the space of a few minutes he had taken an aversion to Leopold. And never would he forget the tart remarks that had served to open their acquaintanceship. The more urgent the young notary's arrival was, the less the Colonel felt disposed to forgive him for having broken through his orders. He was one of those who grow obstinate in the bad resolutions they form, and who are never more stubborn than when they are in the wrong.

Frossard entered the little sitting-room and began to talk with Mademoiselle de Cygne about her affairs. He had already taken several important steps. He had telegraphed to the Count the news of his brother-in-law's death, so that he might return in time for the funeral. He had made all possible arrangements in order to spare Mademoiselle de Cygne any troublesome proceedings. And with cordial eagerness he offered to accomplish any possible service for his young client. Ignorant whether the Marquis de Cygne had any money in the house, he had brought a large sum with him for the use of the heiress, and proposed at once to make the necessary searches in the Hotel so as to put all the affairs of the deceased in good order.

This intervention had the effect of rousing Merlot's irritation to its topmost height. And feeling he was useless the Colonel spoke of withdrawing. A despairing gesture from Madeleine at once dictated to Frossard his line of conduct. The young notary insisted on Merlot's remaining. No one, he remarked, could replace the Colonel as regarded Mademoiselle de Cygne. His being a friend of the family gave him an exceptionally advantageous position. And

besides, the energy that he knew how to display, and here the young man could not help smiling, would be of incontestable utility. He, Frossard, would be obliged to withdraw to his great regret. As he said this he looked at Madeleine. The Count would probably arrive the next evening, as a telegram from Pierre Séverac, an old friend of the notary's, announced that he had already set out. Till then the Colonel would display true devotion in remaining.

Madeleine gave Frossard a grateful look that amply repaid him for the efforts he had just made. And the young notary, filled with an emotion that he had never before felt in the exercise of his functions, withdrew, leaving the Colonel master of the field.

CHAPTER V

MADemoiselle DE CYGNE's position underwent a singular change in a few hours. One day she had nothing but the meagre allowance that her father paid her every month, and which nearly all went to the poor; the next she found herself mistress of an immense fortune. The Marquis de Cygne had considerably increased his property in forty years. Incapable of spending a penny, except for his beloved curiosities, the old miser left more than three hundred thousand francs a year, with his house, estimated at eight hundred thousand francs, and his collection, the value of which was inestimable, for Tristrane had declared that the picture gallery alone was worth twelve million francs.

In fact, the Marquis possessed some of the finest Troyons, Dupres, Corots, Millets, and Rousseaus, that these famous artists had ever produced. He had acquired them for a mere nothing, at the time when these admirable painters' works, unappreciated by the vulgar, had no sale.

A Delacroix, perhaps the most astounding picture of this painter of genius, representing Don Sebastian of Portugal visiting the field of battle at Alcazar-Kébir and weeping over the dead bodies of his soldiers, had been bought by the Marquis for twelve hundred francs. At present, it had

become worth a sum that the fever of the auction-room alone could fix. Without the slightest artistic prejudice, the Marquis had bought ancient and modern works alike, and his gallery contained marvellous specimens of Rafaele, Rembrandt, Cranach, Ruysdael, Murillo, Teniers, Backhuysen, Potter, and the Jesuit of Antwerp, as well as the *chefs-d'œuvre* of the modern school. Mademoiselle de Cygne thus became, all at once, by the death of her father, one of the richest heiresses of Parisian society.

Astonished, hardly able to realise what had happened to her, understanding but one thing, that she was an orphan, Blanche listened coldly to those who told her she was a very rich heiress, shook her head, and did not reply. In the depths of her mind a vague project began to spring up. Brought up in a convent, never having quitted that calm and austere retreat, she knew nothing of the world except by hearsay. And the little she had thus learnt of it had rather frightened than tempted her. Her happiest moments had been passed in retirement with her dear nuns. On the days that all the other girls went out, she had spent some charming hours in the garden with Madeleine. It was a life so free from all care! She felt herself so well protected behind those high walls covered with ivy, where the noise of the outside world never penetrated, that she had thought there could be no happier state than to live for ever in this holy abode. Her mind, rather inclined to reverie, had gradually taken a mystic turn, and during the services, kneeling before the Virgin's altar, she had often prayed for the continuation of this peaceful life. Left to herself at a very early age, never having known her mother, forgotten by her father, she was unacquainted with the delights of home life. For a long time she had had no one on whom she could lavish the wealth of tenderness that filled her heart. She had never lived at home, and had no sweet recollections of the spot. No tradition preserved, no joy felt, no desire experienced, attracted her towards society. Her real home was the convent, and Madeleine was her only affection.

During the first hours that she spent at her father's deathbed, in the profound bitterness of her utter lonesome-

ness, she saw no refuge for herself but the convent. There she would be sure never to be alone. The black dress there would not always cover the same women, under the white cap she would not always see the same faces; but it would always be the same style of existence, the same peace in the present, the same security in the future. The poor girl, deprived of all affection, longing to be loved, endeavoured to create some artificial attachment. It was not an ardent religious feeling that was prompting her, it was the fear of breaking the sole tie that attached her to something, and to find herself left alone in the world.

A hope that she hardly confessed to herself strengthened her in this resolution. Madeleine might perhaps consent to follow her example, and stay with her. Placed in the same position, having but little to expect from her father, who kept her in retirement, why should not her friend accept a solid and devoted friendship in exchange for the chances of life? Both together, what would they have to regret or wish for? As a matter of fact, Madeleine did not appear to have the slightest vocation for a religious life. Whilst Blanche was grave and thoughtful, Madeleine was, on the contrary, lively and cheerful. Her eyes sparkled with wit and gaiety. She seemed to have inherited her father's daring. Very frank, always singing some gay song, sprightly and prompt at all recreations, she was not one of those sensitive creatures who retire into their shell at the slightest touch, but one of those fresh and handsome roses that blossom in the sun, and proudly turn their thorns to any too enterprising hands. Between Blanche and Madeleine the contrast was very striking, but in spite of this, and perhaps on that account, the affection that united the two young girls was close and sincere. Had they been sisters, they could not have loved each other more.

Without the slightest idea of the plans that Mademoiselle de Cygne was laying, Madeleine stopped with her friend during these long and weary hours, and not once did the image of Leopold Frossard pass before her eyes. Blanche was in trouble, and Madeleine conscientiously shared her affliction as she would have shared her joys.

The next evening, as the young lawyer had expected, the

Count de Canalheilles arrived with Séverac. He did not even trouble to go to his house, but drove straight to the Rue de Bellechasse. It was the second time for twenty years that he entered the Marquis's Hotel. The first time, his sister was dying, and he had been obliged to force his way to her bedside. He had now no opposition to overcome; the sole mistress of the house was this fair young girl, who had so often occupied the Count's thoughts, and whose portrait had made so deep an impression on him.

He went upstairs with a beating heart, silently shook hands with Merlot, and paused at the door of the drawing-room.

At the sight of the stranger Blanche rose up. She gazed at this tall old man of vigorous appearance, and without ever having seen him, knew him at once. A spontaneous feeling attracted them both. The Count opened his arms, and Blanche threw hers round his neck and burst into tears, glad to be able to give vent to her pent-up feelings. Leaning on her uncle's shoulder, the young girl wept silently. The Count, respecting her grief, spoke not a word. What could he have said to her? He held her close, and made her understand the tenderness he felt for her by affectionately pressing her hand. When Mademoiselle de Cygne became calmer, the Count, stepping back, was at last able to look at her as he had so long wished to do. It was really she, the charming original of the commonplace photograph that Merlot had shown him one day. She had her mother's pure forehead, crowned with fair hair, and the same serious smile. A cloud passed over the Count's face. If Blanche had only lost her father a year ago, if he had had her under his care, if this adorable child had come to live with him then, what a change in his life, what resolutions, now irrevocably made, would not have even occurred to him?

And suddenly he thought of the sad and cheerless period during which he had vainly endeavoured to find an object of affection to fill up the voidness of his life, changed by the hand of Fate. Then a radiant face appeared, that of Sarah, with her golden hair, clear eyes, and provoking smile. He pictured her just as he had seen her for the first time on the

quay at Marseilles, as he was going to lunch with Séverac at the Réserve. How promptly she had conquered him ! How quickly he had become her slave, forgetting his sixty years, rivalling in gallantry and delicate attentions the young fellows ; passing many sleepless nights, like the youngest sub., thinking of her ; asking if he could ever hope to obtain her love ; becoming simple, anxious and credulous—he, the sceptic, the *blasé*, the proud gallant who for thirty years had been the spoiled darling of the most seductive and beautiful women !

How was it that in the heat and ardour of his passion he had been led away to offer his hand, the hand of an old man, to this young girl, thus committing the greatest of follies, about which there could be no self-deceit, though he tried to persuade himself that he was still a very presentable husband ?

Profound aberration ! He realised it now that he was far from Sarah, no longer under the irresistible charm that this enchanting woman exercised over him—now that he had returned to his proper senses, as if it sufficed that this fair girl should touch his burning forehead with her lips, to dispel all the illusions that troubled and blinded him ! He could not help thinking himself that he presented the appearance of a respected father rather than that of a lover about to lead his betrothed to the altar. He felt that he was stout, knew that he was old, and thought himself ridiculous ; and in his own mind he cursed his light head, passionate even under his grey hairs, which had embarked him in such a perilous affair. He became more and more discontented in the course of his reflections, even asking himself if there were no means of escape, and of making the beautiful English girl understand that they had both formed plans which it would be impossible to realise. But how could he break with this charming young girl without being guilty of brutality and ingratitude, after she had done him the immense favour of consenting to share his winter, she who was in all the splendour of the springtime of life ? Ought he not to be grateful towards this young girl, so sought after, so courted, for having allowed herself to be captivated by the *éclat* of his name and his brilliant military

reputation, and for having sacrificed the liberty which her immense fortune and the independence of her character rendered so sweet? And then, had he not, in an hour of supreme rapture, given his word? For that there was no remedy; and even were he to marry Sarah without pleasure, he must marry her, for he had promised to do so.

Seized with remorse, on seeing himself so securely bound, he rose up, and walked about the room, irritated against this old dog of a Marquis, as he usually called him, who having but one sensible thing to do, and that was to die, had not had sufficient good taste to do it at the proper time, and leave him his niece, whom he would have loved as his own child, and who, once married, would have procured him all the joys of family life, without any of its annoyances.

The Count went up to Blanche, who was now calmer, and talked to her gently. He told her how much he loved her, even before knowing her. Certainly, he did not wish to speak ill of her father, especially at such a moment, but if he had not had the pleasure of seeing her sooner, it was due to the hostility displayed towards him by the late Marquis. And as Blanche raised her beautiful eyes on him with an imploring look, he continued:

"Yes, my dear child, I would have given anything to have been able to see you. But I was afraid of displeasing your father, I envied Merlot, and often spoke to him about you. Your mother, whom I loved dearer than anyone in this world, was taken from us too soon. She would have been able to arrange many difficulties, and maintain peace between your father and myself, in spite of the difference in our tastes and way of living. But Fate decided otherwise. However, now that you are alone, we shall be able to make up for lost time. It is needless to say that my house is yours, and that you can come to-day, if you like. I will find you a companion, you will be quite your own mistress, as a young woman of your years should be, for you are of age, my dear girl, and you are perfectly free to dispose of your fortune as you think proper. And when you abandon your mourning, you will go into society, and be perfectly free to dispose of your future as well as of your fortune."

A pause ensued, Blanche, who had become even more

serious, seemed to be finally reflecting; then making an effort to say what she had, however, at the tip of her tongue, she replied :

"I am very grateful to you, uncle, for your kind intentions, but I must ask your permission to decline your proposal. I am greatly troubled, and very undecided, and should like to have time to recover myself and to reflect. When I am calmer, I will let you know my plans. For the present, I have but one wish."

She stopped short, as if still hesitating

"Speak, my dear child," said the Count affectionately. "Your wishes, whatever they may be, shall be respected. I give you my word."

"Well, I think of going back to the convent."

"Back to the convent!" exclaimed the Count. "But for a time only?" And very anxious, he tried to read the young girl's thoughts in her eyes.

"For a time, at first," resumed Blanche firmly; "perhaps for a permanency afterwards, if I find in that house, where I spent my childhood, the realisation of my dream of tranquillity and rest."

"Tranquillity! Rest!" exclaimed the Count warmly. "At your age, at your entry in life, you're thinking of rest, you're seeking tranquillity? But what ideas have they put into your head? What direction have they given to your thoughts? Is it possible they can have——?"

"Pray suspect nothing, uncle," interrupted Blanche. "No one has attempted to bias my action. My determination, which is in no way irrevocable, I assure you, has been advised by no one. The holy women with whom I have lived have far too much respect for themselves ever to pronounce a word which might influence me. They have inspired me with real affection for them. Alas! they are the only ones. That's all. Let me stop at the convent a little longer, and you will make me very happy."

"I have no right to prevent you doing as you wish," replied the Count gloomily, "and my affection for you is too recent to allow of me asking you to share it. But know, my child, that you will break my heart, and that you will be acting against your mother's last wishes, if you continue

in the path you have unfortunately entered on. Consider the matter, think of yourself, and think of me a little as well. As to your decision, I leave it entirely to you and your tender heart."

The Count felt very awkward with Blanche. How could he appeal directly to her sense of devotion and affection—how could he ask her to devote herself to him, as to a father, when he was on the point of consecrating himself entirely to another?

Leopold Frossard, arriving at that moment, extricated the Count from a delicate situation. We must confess that the young lawyer's first glance was not for his clients, it was directed towards Mademoiselle Merlot, who had already arranged a place for herself, in one corner of the vast drawing-room. There, silent, and, as it were, detached from all that was going on around her, but not losing the slightest detail of this new existence, she was diligently crocheting some woollen jackets for the poor.

On seeing Frossard come in, the Count rose and went to him. Merlot, grunting, placed himself, with a sullen air, between the young man and his daughter. Smiling and delighted at seeing Madeleine, whom he had not hoped to meet at the Hotel de Cygne, Leopold, after bowing to Blanche, went and made himself very agreeable to the Colonel, who responded with the amiability of a bull-dog. To the animosity that he still bore against Frossard for the deliberate manner in which he had "sat on him" the previous day, was added a vague sentiment of paternal jealousy. A secret instinct had warned Merlot from the first of the great admiration the young lawyer felt for Madeleine.

"I am very happy to see, Colonel," said Frossard, with an engaging smile, "that you so kindly consented to favour my young client with your presence until the General's arrival."

"Do you think," replied Merlot sharply, "that I wanted your invitation to do such a simple thing, which was almost my duty?"

Frossard turned very red, and looked round in the hope of finding some encouragement and support, but saw that Madeleine was bending over her work, as if afraid to inter-

fere between the two adversaries. The Count alone showed him an open and sympathetic face. The young man, anxious to put an end to a conversation so badly begun, turned towards the General, and said with a gracious air :

“I have learnt the news, Count, and in common with all your friends, I am delighted to hear of this union which will perpetuate a name that threatened to die out. I hope to have the honour of being presented to Miss O'Donnor shortly.”

On hearing these words, Merlot gave vent to a series of Ah ! Ahs ! which nearly broke the old china on the side-board. And with sparkling eyes, he placed himself before the Count and remarked :

“I also have read this report in the newspapers, but I confess that, less credulous than Maître Frossard, I did not believe it.”

This time Frossard really thought the ceiling was about to fall down on his head. In an instant he became cold and hot, then hot and cold, stamping with his feet without knowing what he was about, asking himself in anguish whether he had done right or wrong in speaking, if he had pleased or offended the Count, and whether he had acted like a sensible man or a fool.

The Count had turned very serious, and, confronting Merlot, boldly replied :

“You were wrong not to believe it, my dear fellow, for it's quite true.”

And with a wave of the hand he indicated that it was useless to continue the subject at the present time. But Merlot was not easily stopped when once he had found a chance of breaking out. His moustaches stiffened like the bristles of a wild boar, and laying his hand on the Count's shoulder, he replied :

“Well, my friend, you're doing a very stupid thing. At our age we shouldn't marry, or if we do, we should marry a widow of forty-five to look after the house and our rheumatics. By Jove ! you're no fool ! You take a young girl, and a charming one, they say. Allow me to tell you that, for an old soldier, you manœuvre like a recruit !”

"That remains to be seen," said the General, smiling. "Perhaps it's vanity on my part, but I still feel very vigorous. I only like the society of young people. You, my dear fellow, are not very amusing, I can tell you——"

"You're mad!"

"I don't say I'm not, but there are various sorts of madness, good and bad. When you get to know Sarah I'm sure you'll understand me. This charming girl will be the delight of my later years, and embellish my declining days. Certainly, if I married a little schoolgirl, very simple and very ignorant, I should prove that I was out of my senses. But it's a woman that I am taking to share my existence, a reasonable, serious and beautiful woman. It required nothing less than Sarah to induce me to make this venture. Another would not have succeeded in inspiring me with that confiding affection that I feel for her. She will be full of delicate attentions for the old man, and perhaps she will also have a little love for the husband. You cannot imagine all the qualities that Sarah will develop. She possesses a very good education, such as our young French girls never receive. She has been all over Europe during the last four years, accompanied by an excellent and respectable lady, Mrs Stewart. And after all, she is not so young as you think, she is twenty-six——"

"By Jove!" interrupted Merlot, "for a fellow like you, who are about to go on the retired list, it's still a very young and very alarming age. They are going to put you on the box next year, old man, and you talk of young girls of twenty-six as you would of your grandmother."

"Well," said the Count in a serious tone, "postpone your judgment. And rest assured, that if I had not found, in the union I am about to contract, solid guarantees of security and happiness, I should not have allowed myself to be drawn into it. Sarah will arrive in Paris in a few days; I will introduce you to her, and when you have seen her, when you have had an hour or two's conversation with her, you will not only absolve me, but you will also envy me."

"Good! good! we shall see," grunted Merlot. "Marriage is always a very ticklish affair. After all, it may be better to decide on it at sixty, you have less time to suffer,"

The Count put an end to the conversation by rejoining Blanche. Thus, by Frossard's precipitation, the Count found himself obliged to confirm the grave event which was destined to make such a considerable change in his existence.

Having owned everything before his friend, he thought it his duty to say a few words on the subject to Mademoiselle de Cygne. This confidence, which he sketched over very lightly, cost him a great effort. It seemed to him that in announcing to Blanche that he was about to give her a companion in his heart he was robbing her of his affection. The young girl, deeply absorbed, paid but little attention to her uncle, and listened unmoved to the announcement of his marriage, which was destined to exercise, later on, such a grave influence over her whole life.

Relieved of an immense weight, the Count took his leave, and Leopold Frossard, hardly recovered from the emotion that his successive mistakes had caused him, also went away.

The next day the Marquis de Cygne's funeral took place with great pomp. The imposing entrance door, surmounted by a scutcheon carved in the stone, bearing a swan argent, cross sable, on a field vert, turned on its rusty hinges for the first time since the death of the Marchioness. The miserly and sordid old nobleman went away to his last resting-place, surrounded by a luxury and pomp which, if we are able to look upon the things of this world on arriving in the next, must have been excessively disagreeable to him. Fashionable society, with which he had long broken, with a complete disdain and absolute horror of the proprieties, attended at his funeral out of respect for the Count de Canalheilles, who was universally loved and respected, notwithstanding his successive weaknesses for the July Monarchy and the Empire. All the curiosity dealers of Paris, too, paid their last respects to the Marquis, as if he had been one of the fraternity.

As a result of this double current of people, belonging to such different classes of society, meetings took place which were worthy of exciting the *verve* of Parisian journalists. Old Doublemart, the dirty Auvergnat from the Passage Jouffroy, dressed in his eternal frock-coat, and

wearing his white hat, which had been turned green by the rain—an old man immensely rich, possessing in his shop the finest Sèvres that finds its way into the market—was seen at the funeral, walking side by side with the Baron de Préfont, a member of the Jockey Club, and a fanatic admirer of eighteenth-century art. The Baron did not dare to neglect bowing to Doublemart, who is a power, and might have made him pay dearly at some sale for his disdain. With well-concealed annoyance, the nobleman was obliged to submit to the contact of the dealer. He tried to escape from him on entering the church, and to lose himself in the crowd. But Doublemart, out of malice, perhaps, was determined not to quit his customer. He took his place on the chair next to the Baron, and without the slightest thought of where he was—besides, was Doublemart Catholic any more than he was Greek or Arab?—the mercantile descendant of Vercingétorix entered into conversation with the elegant scion of a noble race.

“So the poor old Marquis has gone!” said Doublemart. “Another curiosity hunter lost to us. Ah! he was up to the dodge, and no mistake. No means of passing off Berlin for Dresden, nor modern china for old, on the Marquis. And how artfully he would come and find us in the wine-shop after the sale, when we were doing the revision! He used to throw his twenty francs on the table like the rest, saying, ‘I’m with you.’ Ah! yes, it may truly be said he was with us. A crafty one! and not proud! There’s Cantinet—you know, Cantinet of the Rue de Chateaudun, who manufactures ancient carved wood chimney-pieces—the scamp has invented a trick for imitating worm-eaten wood. Clever fellow!”

The Baron at first pretended to be plunged in deep meditation, in order to let it be supposed he did not hear what the Auvergnat was saying to him. But the latter continued all the same:

“Baron, you, who are so fond of miniatures, come round to my place this afternoon; I have just received two that I attribute to Pétitot. Come and see them; it costs nothing to look at them.”

“Ah! really!” replied the Baron involuntarily, seized by

his passion, and forgetting everything, in his eagerness to hear about, and, if possible, to purchase a rare piece.

"Two marvels, and undoubtedly of the period; the enamel is exquisite, and the workmanship astonishing. Stidler thinks the first is a portrait of Mademoiselle de Hautefort, and the other of the Grande Mademoiselle."

"Ah! you've shown them to Stidler," said the Baron, who being a fervent Catholic, bent over his chair, for the bell was tinkling for the Elevation. And his face became clouded at the thought that the famous expert had perhaps made Doublemart an offer and given him some idea as to the value of his "find."

"You know I never let anything go without Stidler seeing it. He has us in his hands, that fellow! It's he who has the best sales, and the richest customers. We are obliged to knuckle down to him. He may be said to skim the market—without mentioning that he is master at the Hotel des Ventes. Look! he's over there, in front of you, in the third row, behind the members of the family"

The Baron looked vaguely in the direction indicated.

In the warm obscurity of the church, hung entirely in black, the tapers appeared like so many golden points. The catafalque, surrounded with incense-burners, and flanked, at the four corners, by silver statues, was completely hidden by floral wreaths. An odour of flowers, withered by the heavy moisture of the atmosphere, oppressed and stifled the mourners. A pure tenor voice, singing the *Agnus Dei*, ascended towards the roof in sonorous strains, softening their hearts, and shaking their nerves. The psalmody of the priest fell on their ears with a heavy monotonous sound, while the boy choristers, slowly passing, with profound genuflexions, looked in a bored way towards the vestry.

A stamping of feet was heard in one of the aisles. It was a bride, dressed in blue silk, a white bonnet on her head, and a bouquet in her hand, who had just arrived with her husband, followed by the wedding guests, passing between the black hangings of the Mass for the Dead. Under her crape veil, and half-hidden in the shade, Blanche was praying fervently for the repose of her father's soul. She had insisted on being at the funeral. And, trembling, her

eyes full of tears, without observing the careless indifference of those around her, without hearing the conversations going on in an undertone, she was accusing herself bitterly of being almost without heart for this father whom she had hardly known. Suddenly a movement took place at the altar, and the officiating priest and his assistants advanced towards the catafalque, the beadle's halberd striking on the floor in a heavy, rhythmical way.

A few responses, made amidst a noise of chairs, moved by the mourners anxious to get away, and then the crowd began to move off, sprinkling, with careless hands, the holy water on the coffin, everyone hastening towards the door, dazzled by the light of the street, and freely breathing a purer atmosphere.

Mademoiselle de Cygne, accompanied by Madeleine, entered a mourning coach, and went to the Père la Chaise cemetery, where the family vault was situated. The drive across Paris, through the animated and noisy streets full of people absorbed in their various affairs, made her giddy. She arrived at the cemetery as fatigued as if she had just made a long journey, and assisted wearily at the brutal and grinding descent of the coffin into the vault, astonished by the indifferent regularity with which the men accomplished this daily task, and sickened by the odour of freshly disturbed earth which arose from the newly-dug graves. Never having considered death in any but a religious light, tender and severe, she was painfully impressed by its industrial and commercial aspect. How far she was from the pompous and consoling pictures, behind which the Roman Catholic religion conceals all the horrors of Death! It was no longer the triumphal and happy departure of a soul, quitting the flesh for the serene heights of heaven, but the lugubrious and vulgar burial of the body beneath the cold stone, and amidst the tired indifference of a crowd of idlers.

A small group of about forty people, who had courageously come as far as the cemetery, surrounded the vault, and beneath the grey sky of this winter afternoon slipped about in the slimy mud, wet with the morning fog. A sharp wind sent the dry leaves whirling down the long paths of the cemetery. And the priest charged with the

last portion of the service bent over the tomb, murmuring his prayers mechanically. Blanche, with an oppressed heart, and trembling legs, knelt down at a neighbouring grave, looking around her with the anguish of a shipwrecked mariner struggling with the waves, and seeking some face, not friendly, for she knew no one, but simply sympathetic. She could only see the ill-natured countenances of people accomplishing a disagreeable task. And as she turned round, with a sigh, the crackling of a dry branch made her start. She looked up, and, at the corner of a chapel, she perceived a young man dressed in black, standing erect with his arms folded, and weeping bitterly. The tears ran down his cheeks and over his moustache. He was not looking in the direction of the tomb. His eyes seemed to be gazing far away, in the vague land of memory. They were indeed wandering far beyond the horizon, towards another cemetery, where, under the green grass, slept some brave soldiers who had fallen gallantly before the enemy. In a corner, a simple wooden cross surmounted a hillock, surrounded by an iron railing. It was there that he was kneeling, in thought. And, overcome by an irresistible feeling of tenderness at the sound of the prayers, feeling a sob rising in his throat, he wiped the tears from his face.

Blanche moved. The young man's eyes suddenly met those of the young girl. Seeing himself observed, he flushed, bent his head, and discreetly disappeared behind the monument. The sight of this grief, corresponding so well with her own, relieved Blanche, and enabled her to stay till the end of the ceremony, and when, amidst the bows of the assistants, and the noise of the mourning coaches which went off swinging on their springs, she left the cemetery on her uncle's arm, she felt more command over herself, less alone, less disconsolate.

At a turn of the path the tall young man reappeared. He was going away slowly, following a narrow track winding amongst the tombs. On observing the General, he raised his hat and bowed. The Count waved his hand in a friendly way. Blanche wanted to know who it was to whom she was indebted for the only consoling impression she had experienced that cruel morning.

"Who is that gentleman?" asked she, with a beating of the heart, as if this simple question might have appeared singular.

"Pierre Séverac, my aide-de-camp," replied the General.

"Pierre Séverac!" repeated the young girl to herself. And this name, which she heard for the first time, became deeply graven in her memory.

The same evening she returned to the convent.

CHAPTER VI

MISS O'DONNOR was installed in a charming little house in the Rue Fortuny, run up to a great height, but embellished with artistic care by an architect, who, being unable to work on a large scale, had determined to produce something pretty.

The Count had expressed a desire that the young woman should not go to one of those commonplace hotels in the Rue de la Paix, as she was in the habit of doing, with a traveller's indifference, every time she came to spend a few weeks in Paris. The house in the Rue Fortuny, a pretty bijou residence, happened to be for sale just at that time. Its proprietor, a young country gentleman, had in a very short time squandered his fortune with certain charming ladies, of a pretty ripe age, and a few amiable friends, past masters in the art of card-playing. The Count had bought the house, furniture, and horses, so that Miss O'Donnor had found a home ready for her on arriving in Paris. This would do very well for three weeks. The house could be let or sold afterwards.

Since he had seen Sarah, the Count had again succumbed to her influence. All the ideas of revolt which he had for a moment experienced on seeing Blanche alone, and free from the ties that had kept her apart from him, the regret he had felt on thinking that he might have met in her that vivifying affection which he longed for, all this did not last. One glance from Sarah dissipated these anxieties, as the rays of the morning sun disperse the clouds which hide the

azure of a summer sky. And not only that, the Count had been suddenly infected by the excitement of the gay, active, and rather fast life which the beautiful English girl had led from the first day of her arrival.

In a few hours her presence in Paris became known, and in the drawing-room there was a continual procession of visitors, who caused a block of carriages in the street, whilst through the house there was a rustling of silk, a murmur of animated conversation, and a clattering of crockery and silver plate for the five o'clock tea.

Mrs Stewart, seated in a corner, in a big Henri Deux arm-chair, calmly read her magazines, lending the young woman the support of her presence. The whole English and American colony came to see her. The young ladies vigorously shook hands with her, giving vent to exclamations of joy, shrill as the cry of a parrot, "Oh, dear! Dear! Is it really true? Oh, what happiness! And how did you make up your mind? You so free! so happy!" And then came the kissing, and sudden excursions towards Mrs Stewart, who submitted to all this display of tenderness with smiling good nature, and offered, with noble resignation, her poor old face to the pink lips of the young English girls.

The Count did not make his appearance till nine o'clock in the evening. He arrived, preceded by an enormous white bouquet, and, with the elegant grace of a well-bred man, listened to Sarah's account of the day's events. She related that Lord Clifton, the hero of the Ashantee War, had come to pay his old friend a visit. Sarah had begged him to act as witness. Mrs Smarden, the wealthy American lady, had sent her an Indian amulet, guaranteeing the happiness of whoever should wear it. During the conversation, packages arrived from the Grands Magasins du Louvre by dozens, and Sarah showed the purchases to the Count with an infantine joy, going into raptures over the cheapness of the articles. She had been to make a few purchases after breakfast, and, tempted by the bargains, had ended by spending twelve thousand francs. Of course she also had to exhibit dear Stewart's outfit, who, having terminated her mission as companion, was about to resume

her liberty and take a little rest, for, by keeping her continually on the move, Sarah had certainly somewhat abused her good nature.

All at once a sonorous vibration was heard in the quiet room. It was that dear old Stewart, whose feelings being overcome by the thought that she was about to be separated from her beautiful mistress, was blowing her nose with great violence. On observing this, the young woman ran up and threw her arms round her old friend's neck, overwhelming her with sweetest promises.

Certainly, it would not be for long! In a few months she would come and stay at Canalheilles. The dear Count was too good-hearted to wish to separate Sarah for ever from the excellent friend who had lived with her so long. And the General joined in heartily, firing off all the English he knew, lavishing "darlings," etc., with the generosity of a man who makes up for quality by quantity. Moreover, Mrs Stewart's future position had been assured by Miss O'Donnor with great liberality, so that henceforth the good lady could enjoy life in peace, being completely independent of everybody.

It was too much, she said; and why did they reward her so liberally for a task that had been so easy to execute?

Thereupon two streams of tears ran down on to her magazines, and she again took out her handkerchief as though she had been called upon to sound the trumpet for the last judgment.

Persuaded by the Count, after holding back for some time, Merlot at last consented to pay a visit to the Rue Fortuny. The Colonel had formed a preconceived notion of the young woman, physically and morally, and did not wish it to be disturbed. He arrived full of mistrust, expecting to find a siren who would try to catch him in her net, and he had fortified himself against all her seductions. Biting his moustaches, he said to himself: "By Jove! the English girl will be deuced crafty if she gets over me like that, straight off." He was not a simpleton, a passionate old man like the General, and he would show her what an old Colonel of the Guards was, for he had seen the world during his military career. However, he was rather affected

on entering. At the drawing-room door he blinked a bit, but pulling himself together, he walked in. -

The smiling simplicity of the reception he met with put him off his guard. In a few words the young woman managed to touch the old soldier on his weak point. She flattered his vanity by alluding to the part he had taken in the deliverance of the English when surrounded by the Russians at Inkermann. She had taken the precaution to question the Count about Merlot. Now, of all the Colonel's exploits, the Inkermann affair was the one on which he prided himself the most. In a few words Sarah placed her grateful country at Merlot's feet. The latter, red as fire, his eyelashes straight as a needle, could not help acknowledging to himself that the little woman was exceedingly agreeable, and that a sharper man than the General would have allowed himself to be caught.

But Merlot's character was such, that having been obliged to give in before the powerful charms of the future Countess de Canalheilles, and unable to find fault with the General since he had been subjugated in the same style, he began to find fault with himself. On going along the Boulevard Malesherbes, smoking his cigar, he ruminated on all he had seen and heard. And from the very influence that Sarah had exercised over him he drew most unfavourable conclusions regarding the young woman.

He thought to himself that she must be a remarkably clever girl to have got over him, Merlot, in such a masterly way. No other woman could boast of having done as much. What would become of the poor General in the hands of such a superior woman as this? He was certain to be led by the nose! Still, that wouldn't matter so much, if his head escaped her guidance.

But with such a wicked pair of eyes as those of this lady, he would not like to be in the General's place. Eyes of a changing blue, passing from light to dark, becoming by turns caressing and imperious. And her mouth! Merlot was particularly terrified by this mouth, with its red lips, thick, and proudly curved, displaying, in a voluptuous smile, the enamel of her sharp, white teeth. And he involuntarily thought of the threatening face of a Jewish woman of

Constantine, who, in an access of jealousy had killed her lover, a comrade of Merlot's, a lieutenant in the Chasseurs d'Afrique. Sarah had the same sensual mouth and the same sphinx-like eyes.

"The deuce!" thought the Colonel, "it isn't possible that she can love this bewrinkled old General; and the day she meets the man of her heart, he must look out for squalls! There will certainly be some gay doings in his house! But if there is a helping hand required to keep things straight, I shall be there at my post. One must stand by one's friends, by Jove! and De Canalheilles shall see, if the occasion presents itself, that he can reckon on me."

The Colonel, having reached his door, rang the bell with such violence, that he made the porter jump and wonder if the house was on fire. The anxiety which Merlot, with his common-sense, had felt with perhaps too much force, was not confined to himself. Another person, who was near Sarah, looked upon her marriage with the Count with great solicitude. This was the honest and excellent Mrs Stewart. At the commencement, when she had seen the Count fall in love with her dear child, she had felt no astonishment. It was the same with the General as with the others, young or old, who approached the beautiful English girl. But when, to the passionate protestations of her admirer, Sarah had replied with unusual gravity, then the good old lady had been seized with considerable fear. She had waited, thinking that the situation would change, and that the young woman, attacked by one of those famous electric fits, during which it seemed as if she had the Evil One in her petticoats, would throw up her elderly lover and, flying off, be dancing at Vienna two days after flirting at Rome. The expected crisis arrived, but with a result diametrically opposed to that which had been hoped for.

Charity is, for the best Roman society, as for Parisian society, a pastime. The need of creating some employment for their leisure hours has led ladies of the aristocracy to found those Charity Bazaars, which are simply occasions for amusement at the expense of the poor. A fête was given in the splendid garden belonging to the Princess

Pandolfini. The Princess had arranged for the erection of a number of small shops where the most prominent ladies of the Roman "upper ten" had promised to come and act as saleswomen. A few young ladies belonging to the foreign colony were also asked to give their assistance, and among them was Miss O'Donnor, who undertook the charge of an elegant little tobacco shop for the day. The Count had sent for a stock of excellent Havanna cigars, an article very rare in Italy, and some Turkish cigarettes. And Sarah, in a charming toilette, took possession of her shop, under the escort of excellent Mrs Stewart.

Business had been very brisk. There was an immense crowd, the weather was remarkably warm, and a great many young fellows of good family, having drunk a few glasses of champagne at twenty francs a glass, began to get rather animated. One of them, the Marquis Patrizzi, who had paid his court to Sarah during the entire season without success, came up, accompanied by some friends, and bought a bundle of cigars, for which he paid a hundred francs. Taking advantage of the occasion, he asked Sarah if she was doing a good business.

"Very fair, as you see," said the pretty young saleswoman. "I sell the cigars that cost sixpence at the rate of ten francs each, and I've done very well." And whilst speaking, she stirred up a heap of gold and silver that she had in a lacquer bowl in front of her.

The noble Roman leant familiarly over the counter.

"If you would light the cigars you sell they would command a higher price," remarked he, his eyes sparkling.

"It's not very probable," said Sarah, without getting angry, "for few people would be mad enough to risk asking me such a thing."

"But have you never smoked, Miss O'Donnor?" inquired the Marquis. "There are many charming and distinguished women who do so."

"In Italy, perhaps, but not in England."

"Will you try? I should be mad enough to give you two thousand francs for a cigar that had touched your lips." And the Marquis offered Sarah the bundle he had just bought, and which was still tied up with its yellow silk ribbon.

"Two thousand francs, that's a good sum," said Sarah coldly, looking the Marquis straight in the face, "and the poor are so much in want of money."

And taking a cigar, she put it to her lips. The triumphant Marquis was already holding out his hand, when a new-comer placed himself quickly between him and the coveted object. It was Séverac, who, just arrived, had witnessed, in astonishment, the young Englishwoman's eccentric action.

"Miss O'Donner," he commenced, and he was going to add, "Take care! you are compromising yourself gravely!" when a flashing look from Sarah stopped him. There was such an expression of anger and indignation in this look that Séverac drew back.

And with a cool and smiling air Miss O'Donnor turned towards the amazed Marquis:

"A cigar like this for such a paltry sum!" said she gaily. "Really, Marquis, it would be giving it away! I've been told that all your noble Roman houses are very poor. You offer two thousand francs for this cigar; I'll give twenty thousand francs to keep it."

At the same time she drew out a cheque-book, and just as if she were paying a milliner's bill, she scribbled a few words on the cheque, tore it off, and threw it in the bowl with the other money, saying:

"For the poor!"

On this occasion the Marquis Patrizzi showed that if he had gone rather too far at the commencement he was determined to act like a gentleman at the close. He cried out, "Bravo!" and clapped his hands, giving the signal to his friends, who cheered the audacious young woman.

Amidst the hurrahs and applause, Sarah, with a severe countenance and black glance, leant over towards Séverac, who stood motionless and astonished at the unexpected conclusion of the incident.

"You see, sir," she said, "that I required neither advice nor protection. In future, I beg you will not interfere."

"Pardon me, mademoiselle," said the young officer gently, "I could not repress that movement of mine on hearing the improper proposal made to you. I was

afraid you might have been the dupe of an excess of charity."

And, in saying these words, Séverac could not repress a smile which completed Sarah's irritation. She imagined she was despised by this grave and serious young man, and, turning pale, could have wept, but that her tears were dried by the warmth of her anger.

"By coming like that to protect me, you offended me more than he who was trying to compromise me."

"Pray pardon me, mademoiselle," said Séverac.

And he went away, after having cast a haughty glance at Patrizzi.

As to Stewart, absorbed in the exciting adventures narrated in her magazines, she had not moved. She was accustomed to seeing Sarah manage her affairs alone, and always to her advantage.

The sale produced a large sum, and Miss O'Donnor's act of royal generosity was the subject of a great many remarks. The Princess Pandolfini replied boldly to the observations made respecting the young woman's somewhat fast conduct.

"What can we say?" observed she, "we can't judge her impartially, she is English and a very eccentric girl. Placed in the same position, a Roman girl would have proudly refused. A German girl, simple and covetous, would have given the cigar and taken the two thousand francs. A French girl, malicious and practical, would have accepted the money and kept the cigar. Only an English girl would have been capable of outbidding, by offering ten times the amount, and coming out triumphant from an adventure in which she might have hazarded her reputation."

"You must not only be English, but also a millionaire," retorted the Countess Valserra, a cousin of Patrizzi's.

The same evening, the adventure was related to the Count, who gently remonstrated with Sarah. But the latter excused herself with such charming grace that it was impossible to be angry with her. Moreover, she did not quite understand the extreme gravity of her conduct. Brought up like a young filly, in the greatest liberty, she

was accustomed to gratify every whim and fancy. However, the affair, which was all over as far as Sarah was concerned, took an unexpected and serious turn for the two men engaged in it.

The next day, Séverac, who rarely went to the theatre at Rome, was persuaded by some friends to accompany them to the Apollo, where *Aida* was being played. During a "wait" between the acts, the young man, having gone upstairs to look for a friend in the boxes, found himself face to face with the Marquis Patrizzi. It has been said that the Marquis was looking for Séverac. In the most innocent manner in the world, the young officer grazed the shoulder of the Roman patrician. The latter made certain disagreeable remarks. Séverac replied warmly. Some friends interfered, and a meeting was decided upon immediately for the following morning.

Now, the Italians are the greatest gossips on the face of the earth. The same evening, the affair was talked about in all the drawing-rooms in the city. And as Sarah was drinking a cup of tea, about one o'clock in the morning, at Lady Stereswort's, wife of the first secretary of the English Embassy, the Countess Valserra arrived in great excitement, and said :

"You've heard the news ? Patrizzi goes out to-morrow with the French officer."

Sarah turned pale, and her hand trembled so much that the click of her cup was heard against the saucer. She exclaimed, "Ah ! Ah !" in such a choking voice that the Countess went up to her, and said hypocritically, for she was aware of the General's sentiments towards the young woman :

"Oh ! you need have no fear, my dear, the Marquis is a splendid swordsman—one of Masaniello's pupils. Got every chance in his favour !"

A quarter of an hour after, Sarah snatched Mrs Stewart from the delights of a third cup of tea that had been lovingly prepared, took leave, and went home in a state of violent agitation. She was a long time getting to sleep, and had frightful dreams. She saw Séverac lying on the grass, with a sword through his body. A large red spot

was spreading over his shirt, and his face, thrown back on the grass, was turning pale at the approach of death. She woke up with a start, and determined not to go to sleep again, bitterly repenting her giddiness which had caused this quarrel between the two young men. Early in the morning, she rose up and walked about the room, unable to keep still, or fix her attention on anything, going from the window to the door, full of anxiety.

She said to herself. "It is impossible they should not inform me of the result. If he is wounded, he will send for me." She did not ask herself for a moment why Séverac should send for her, nor by what right. She had forgotten everything, what she called the young officer's pride, his icy reserve, and his seeming censure. She felt a passionate interest in his fate, though hardly knowing why, and would have laid down her life to see him return safe and sound. Up to one o'clock she received no news. She was mad with impatience, and was about to go to the General's house, to find out what had taken place, when the Count arrived. With a bound, she was by his side.

"Well," said she, "this duel?"

"Terminated in a very satisfactory way," replied the Count gaily. "The Marquis will be confined to his bed for six weeks. Oh! I was not at all anxious, I know Séverac. He is very vigorous, very cool, and handles the sword in a masterly manner. We have practised a good deal together."

"And where is he?" asked Sarah, in a trembling voice.

"He has just left for Naples. This duel will cause some talk. Séverac, who does not care to attract attention, preferred to go away for a few days. Besides, I don't want him just now."

Sarah sank back in her chair. After the violent emotion she had felt, this prosaic termination of the affair produced the effect of a cold bath on her. Her heart was bursting. Thus, he had not even come to say good-bye, after having risked his life for her. For it was really for her that he had fought this duel. The altercation at the Apollo was a mere pretext. And he went away silently, disdainfully. He must have a poor opinion of her! And little by little,

the interest she had taken in him turned into a feeling of anger. She construed Séverac's interference, followed by this haughty silence, into a cruel offence. And the action which ought to have served as the commencement of a solid friendship between them only separated them more than ever from one another.

Séverac, who speedily returned, soon saw himself the object of Sarah's criticisms and raillery. It was above all the young man's gravity and coldness which excited the beautiful young girl's anger. She said to the General:

"Confess that Monsieur Séverac is your mentor, and that the Government has sent him with you to prevent you committing any imprudence. Between you two, it's he who is the serious man, and you the light-headed youngster. You are only twenty-five, whilst he is at least eighty."

The Count, secretly flattered by these comparisons so much to his advantage, interceded in Séverac's favour.

"You don't know him yet," said he to Sarah, "you think him of a cold and rough nature, whilst he is only reserved and modest. His father was like that, and nobody valued him more than I did. Beneath his icy manner there was a great warmth of heart, and an admirable generosity of spirit. And what certainty of affection! He would have allowed himself to be cut to pieces for his friends. Rather stiff in appearance perhaps, rather puritanical, but certainly not commonplace!"

"It's just this puritanical air that horrifies me," remarked Sarah. "That's the very reason I left England. There's nothing I detest so much as a man without youth, and your Séverac is a young old man!"

"Not exactly that. He's quick enough sometimes, when it's necessary, as witness the Patrizzì affair."

It was a piece of malice on the General's part, to remind Sarah of this adventure, and he invariably reduced her to silence by these means. He abused this advantage for Séverac's benefit.

"Be indulgent towards him," said the Count at last. "I love him as if he were my own son. And I have contracted a debt of gratitude which I must pay to the son of

my friend. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to see you on good terms with Pierre."

"Very good, I'll treat him as a privileged being, and he shall have the right to do and say what he likes, whilst I shall not have the right to find anything wrong."

"I don't ask as much as that—simply treat him like everyone else."

Then in a gently affectionate tone he resumed :

"I should even like you to assume a little of that coldness which you blame him for so much, my dear Sarah. You must prepare to live in France, and there is no country in the world where people are so strict, whatever foreigners may say. I want to see you admired and loved. A little gravity, and you will be perfect."

Miss O'Donnor must have been exceedingly anxious to please the General, for she became remarkably serious all at once. This changeable girl, so captivating by the impulsiveness of her fancies, suddenly became metamorphosed into a stiff and severe person, on whose nose one was almost tempted to look for the spectacles of a quakeress. She kept the young men at a distance, and remained continually surrounded by a circle of grave, serious men, amongst whom the Count, with his light and brilliant manner, appeared quite a youngster.

She seemed to hate everything she had formerly liked; she never danced, never rode, and wore very high dresses. She expressed opinions entirely opposed to her former ideas. She frequently said of a man of fifty, "He's a young man still." To anyone knowing her less intimately than the faithful Stewart, she would have appeared to be preparing an evolution. But her companion knew very well that she was incapable of any calculation, and that if she behaved like this it was because her present tastes prompted her to do so. The news of Sarah's engagement with the Count de Canalheilles surprised no one in Rome. For the last few weeks, the French nobleman's attentions had been regarded as a regular courtship. From the rank of "cavaliere servente," he had passed to that of future husband. Everything was in accordance with the received notions, and in a country where rank, birth, and fortune have still a value,

no one was astonished that Sarah should marry a man much older than herself, but of noble birth, immense wealth, and high position.

CHAPTER VII

THE reading of magazines, in which love is generally represented as being the mainspring of all human action, had given Mrs Stewart other notions, for one evening, whilst Sarah was undressing and talking in her spacious bedroom lighted by the pale gleam of a night lamp, the excellent woman made up her mind to speak.

How could Sarah, who had had the most captivating men at her feet, allow herself to become the wife of Count de Canalheilles, who might have been her father? Was it not preparing many troubles for herself in the future? The dear child was evidently not marrying the Count for love. Certainly he was a very fine man, of noble appearance and handsome face, with his long white moustaches and black eyebrows, but he was at least sixty, and Sarah must make up her mind to be simply his daughter. Had she never dreamed of a sweeter union, full of tender effusions, of a happy life in company with another?

And in a lyrical impulse the dear old soul poured forth a passionate flood of romantic aspirations. She showed Sarah, on a velvety lawn, beneath the blue sky, a vision of rosy-cheeked children with long curly hair, playing in the shade of the trees, and crying out for joy. A young woman, dressed in white, leaning on the arm of an elegant young man, was coming down the steps of the house, and the little troop ran up, holding out their hands, and crying, "Mamma!" And in the evening, in the nursery, the dear little angels, half asleep, gently rolled their heads on the pillow, in the shadow of the curtains, while their mother watched over them. Little by little all became silent, and the calm breathing of the children marked the fleeting hours of the night.

Was not this the truest happiness? And instead of this

peaceful existence Sarah was going to plunge into the gaiety and excitement of a life of pleasure. Carried away by his fashionable connections and his official position, the General, proud of his wife's beauty, would gladly satisfy her tastes. Besides, would this not be skilful policy on his part? By allowing his young wife to indulge in a continual round of fashionable pleasures, he would prevent her from perceiving the coldness and emptiness of her home life. Pleasure would, for a time, procure her the illusion of happiness. But the day when, tired of this artificial existence, she began to look for a little quiet pleasure and repose, alas, how greatly disappointed she would be! The age of pleasures past—for one tires of everything, even the most agreeable things—what would she do? How would she occupy her leisure time? She would look around her and find nothing that could compensate for those treasures of a ripe age—children.

And this monotonous existence would still be happy compared to that which might be reserved for her. Suppose, after she had bound herself for life, that she should meet someone whom she loved? Suppose that her heart spoke all at once? How this would trouble her life. What disorder it would cause in her heart and mind! Energetic and violent, would she resist the tempting voice of passion? What struggles, if she engaged in the contest! What cares, if she succumbed! And what bitterness, if she resisted!

Sarah had become very thoughtful, then with a frowning look, and with her face contracted, she exclaimed

“You talk to me of love! Do I know if I have a heart? I've often said as much in a joke, but I now tell you seriously, I really believe my mother forgot to place one in my bosom. I come of a wandering race, and Nature has never allowed the children of this race to attach themselves to anyone or anything, so as to save them from the grief of parting when obliged to go to other countries, amongst other people. You know very well that I have some quicksilver in my veins. Travelling is my only pleasure. Up to the present moment I have been carried from one end of Europe to the other by this love of a wandering existence. Brought up like the young girls of my country,

education was unable to subdue my nature. The gypsy blood runs strongly in my veins, and I often feel longings for the savage life I formerly led, which I find great difficulty in suppressing. Would it be a desirable thing for me to have children, to transmit to them a peculiar temper, which would make them feel uneasy beneath the restraints imposed on them by the society in which they lived? Besides, if ever I should wish to enjoy the pleasures of maternity, if I should ever desire to indulge in the delight of patting the heads of the curly-headed little darlings whom you picture to me, I know how a child is to be procured. Did not my adopted mother set me an example? I'll stop my carriage on the road, and the first little urchin I meet with and like, I will buy from his parents. There is so much misery in the world! I shall be doing a poor couple a favour, and at the same time obtain the plaything I desire. It's only a question of money, like everything else nowadays!"

And with a movement of disdain Sarah began to laugh, with an almost ferocious expression on her face. Seated on the edge of the bed in a charming pink dressing-gown, she was mechanically balancing her silver-embroidered slipper on the tip of her tiny foot, and looking with a vacant air at the pattern of the carpet. A grave silence ensued, Mrs Stewart having nothing more to say, and Sarah being engaged in serious thought.

"And yet I should have dearly liked to love," resumed she, in a changed voice. "People surround me, flatter me, and adore me. I have had many lovers. You told me so, and I know it. But where is the use of being loved; the thing is to love!" And striking her bosom, she continued. "But, to love, one must feel something beating here, and I have never felt anything. I am twenty-six; I look a young woman, but I am already an old one, and amongst all the men I have seen, I have never met with one who has caused me the slightest emotion, either pleasurable or the reverse, and of whom I can say that I loved or hated him. The most complete, absolute, and desolating indifference; such is my lot, and I think it will always be so."

Sarah pronounced these last words slower and, as it were,

hesitatingly. Before her eyes, Pierre Séverac's grave and handsome face presented itself. He at least was not indifferent to her, for he had displeased her from the first by his haughty reserve. Of all those who had lived on intimate terms with her, he was the only one who had not paid his court to her, who had not displayed towards her those humble gallantries and servile attentions which had brought a scornful smile to the young girl's lips. He kept in his place, saying very little, simply what was necessary, and seeming to blame the follies through the midst of which he disdainfully passed. It was this which had caused Sarah's antipathy, for he was the first who had escaped from her sovereign influence. Yes, certainly, though she did not like to acknowledge it, she hated him, this rebel who assumed the airs of a moralist, and she would always hate him.

"The Count will be a father to me, as you say," resumed Sarah; "and it's precisely this that has decided me. He will be indulgent towards me, he loves me, and will overlook my capricious temper. I was not thinking in the least of marriage. But I hardly know how I feel just now. I experience a sort of lassitude, which quite overcomes me. I, who formerly could never keep still, would now like never to stir. It seems to me that I am undergoing a complete transformation. My ideas have greatly changed. I feel I should like to create a home for myself. And as I distrust myself, I want this home to be gay and brilliant, so that I may find a pleasure in remaining in it. The Count has a large fortune, and I am very rich myself, so that we shall keep up a large establishment.

"Our extensive connections will enable us to see a great deal of company. It is impossible such an animated existence can fail to please me. One cannot live for ever on high roads, my dear Stewart, and I aspire to something more comfortable than is to be met with in hotels. In short, I am going to imitate the men who settle down, and adopt a regular life. And, believe me, this is the most sensible thing I can do. With my tastes and temper, it is very probable that if I married a man of my own age our home would soon go to the dogs. A young husband would not show the same indulgent tenderness which the Count will

certainly feel for me. And then, I need guidance; I feel it; and Monsieur de Canalheilles will have some authority over me. In fact, I am very frank, and have opened my heart to him. He knows what I feel, and understands what I should like. He is not marrying me with his eyes shut, and he has confidence in the future. Why should I be less hopeful than he is?"

This conversation had not dissipated good Mrs Stewart's anxiety, but it had reduced her to silence. Knowing Sarah's resolute and imperious temper, she realised it would be useless to insist, and that all she could say or do to combat her will would only make her more determined. Moreover, satisfied at having relieved her conscience by talking to Sarah in what she considered to be the language of reason, the lady's companion resumed her usual quiet life, and left the matter in the hands of Fate.

But Fate seemed to have decided that Miss O'Donnor's plans should be carried out, for the death of the Marquis de Cygne having called the Count back to Paris, Sarah was not long in following him. And she was now installed in the small house in the Rue Fortuny, and everything was being prepared for the marriage. The Count's family had welcomed the young foreigner. The Pompérans, won over to Sarah's cause, since the journey from Naples to Marseilles, and seeing a prospect of a round of pleasures, were loud in their praises. Miss O'Donnor, followed by Mrs Stewart, and accompanied by the Count, had been to the Convent of the Sacred Heart to see Blanche. The orphan girl had been greatly impressed by her future aunt's beauty, and captivated by her elegant grace. Standing side by side, Blanche in all the splendour of her twentieth year, and Sarah still in the flower of early womanhood, they looked like two sisters. The Count gazed at them with joyful emotion, thinking that in a very short time his formerly dull and silent home would be enlivened and embellished by these two charming creatures. As if she had read the Count's thoughts, Sarah, turning to Blanche, said to her.

"You know, my darling, that your uncle's house will always be yours, and that he will be delighted for you to come and live with him."

The General, with tears in his eyes, cast a mute glance of thanks towards her who had so well divined his thoughts and expressed his wishes.

"You hear Miss O'Donnor, my child," added he. "I hope you will soon give us the pleasure of seeing you amongst us. I quite understand that you should prefer to be alone for a time; your loss is so recent, that you naturally do not care to go into society. But the most sincere regrets do not last for ever. Your grief will gradually lessen, and you will then think of your family. That day will be one of the happiest of my life."

"I thank you very much, uncle," said Blanche, embracing the old man tenderly. Then, turning towards Sarah, she said: "You will not be married without my praying for you. I shall be in a corner of the church, and if you don't see me, you will know that, amongst all those who surround you, none will have expressed more sincere and hearty wishes for your happiness than myself."

Blanche had spoken these words with emotion. Suddenly her beautiful, thoughtful face lighted up, and with a smile which made quite another woman of her, she said:

"It seems to me that our positions are reversed. I am the grave person called upon to give you my blessing; you are the niece, and I am the aunt." And she looked at her plain crape dress, and then at the elegant costume worn by Miss O'Donnor.

"This being so," added she, "you will allow me to make you a little wedding present."

Then becoming serious again, gaiety having for a moment lit up her face like a ray of sunshine which darts from between two clouds, she said:

"I will look in my mother's jewel-boxes. My grandmother gave her all her jewels. You must wear one of these ornaments, as you are going to belong to the family."

The next day Sarah received a small packet containing an oblong leather case. She ran to her room and locked the door, opened the case with feverish haste, and although she was accustomed to the most splendid jewellery, she could not repress a cry. On the black velvet lining a necklace of diamonds and sapphires sparkled. With a childish joy, the

young woman held it to the light, admiring the purity of the diamonds, all of the old-fashioned cut, and the dark blue of the sapphires. Quickly undoing her bodice, and uncovering her shoulders and bosom, hidden by the fine Valenciennes lace of her chemise, she put the necklace on, and stood a moment before the glass, looking at herself with satisfaction, then turning on one foot, and opening Mrs Stewart's door, she cried out: "Come and see this, my dear!"

And as the old lady stopped at the door, amazed, Sarah gaily made her a deep curtsey with charming grace.

"Allow me to introduce the Countess de Canalheilles!"

Then taking off the necklace and turning it over, examining the stones one by one, with the attention and keen appreciation of a jeweller, she said:

"My dear, it's worth two hundred thousand francs, if it's worth a penny!"

In a moment the love of gain and the taste for gaudy things inherent in her race showed themselves. For a few minutes she had again become the little gypsy, whose mother had begged and stolen along the country roads.

A few days later the marriage of the Count and Miss O'Donnor was celebrated at the Madeleine.

There was an immense crowd, and as many different languages were heard as in the Tower of Babel. On the one hand the whole foreign colony, amongst whom Sarah had lived, a wandering set, who go in pursuit of pleasure from Trouville to Nice, from Nice to Paris, and from Paris to London, according to the season, and who camp out rather than reside. On the other, the best Parisian society, with which the Count was intimately connected by his social and official position. An illustrious Marshal, the glorious soldier of Saint-Privat, proudly buttoned up in his uniform covered with orders, his long hair thrown back, acted as witness for the Count, in conjunction with the Marquis de Tréglade, French Ambassador at Vienna, a diplomatist of the utmost acuteness, and a writer of great merit.

Merlot, in evening dress, with his Commander's order round his neck, showed to his full height. Hearing the gossips who had slipped into the crowd making some re-

marks about the wedding party, he grumbled between his teeth. A stout woman, dressed in a red cotton jacket, with a handkerchief on her head, had left her flower-stand for a few minutes, and was digging her elbows into her neighbour's sides, determined to get into the front rank. And meanwhile the exclamations and remarks flew about :

"Ah ! there's the bride," said a handsome fellow, who, with a young woman on his arm, stopped at the foot of the steps. "She's fair. What a pretty colour her hair is !"

"What are you talking about, it's dyed," replied his companion sourly. "I can have hair like that whenever you like, for twenty francs a bottle."

"She put her right foot forward first," cried out a little workgirl. "She'll be master in the house."

"Ah ! there's the bridegroom. He's an old man. You've no teeth for such fine fruit, old boy !"

"Look over there, the one in the uniform covered with medals ; that's Canrobert."

"Oh ! the brave fellow ! I was quite close to him when the troops came back from Italy. He saluted with his sword. He always looks so amiable !"

"He's an assassin ! He fired on the people in December !" cried out a hoarse voice, whilst a tall silk cap was seen moving about in the crowd.

"And you, you ugly monkey, perhaps you didn't fire on the troops, during the Commune ? The columns of the Madeleine show the marks still !" exclaimed the stout woman.

There was a general uproar.

"Oh, my eye !" croaked the hoarse voice.

"Get out ! When will you be run in ?" resumed the fat woman, turning round, with her arms akimbo.

The silk cap dived down and disappeared. Frossard, having arrived late, ran up the steps quickly, causing the crowd to protest.

"Here, I say, Fatty, don't trample on our toes !"

"What a rude little man !" cried another.

"I beg your pardon ! Excuse me !" said Frossard, smiling all round. But he stopped short, for he had just caught sight of Merlot, who was looking on with a grin.

He made a low bow to Madeleine's father, and taking a place by his side, said.

"My best respects, Colonel."

"You're not punctual, young man. It's a bad thing in business, you know."

"I have just come from the Court; an important affair to finish. There are some minors in the case, and that makes it difficult. However, my client has come off fairly well."

"Some more wretched beings that you have let in, I suppose," said Merlot sardonically. "Yours is a nice trade."

And the Colonel turned his back to his bugbear.

The procession marched pompously up the steps over the carpet which extended from the church to the Boulevard, amidst murmurs of admiration. It was one of those beautiful days at the close of winter, already full of the warmth of spring. The early buds were giving a greenish hue to the branches of the trees. And, amidst the uproar of the Place, encumbered with vehicles and black with on-lookers, to the faint sound of the organ playing a joyous march, Sarah, in her white veil, leaning on old Lord Clifton's arm, walked with a beating heart up the steps, at the top of which quite a gay and brilliant existence awaited her. A double row of guests, all grave and respectful, formed on either side as she passed along. And in the obscure depths of the church the painted windows sparkled, illuminated by the sun, and surrounding with a many-coloured light the praying saints and the golden-crowned angels.

The young girl took in this glorious scene at a glance, and a flush of pride suffused her brow. She saw herself triumphant, mistress of this world in which she was about to take a sovereign's place. And with head erect she was entering the church, when, near a column, she perceived Séverac. He was in full uniform, his fine handsome face standing out clearly from the dark background of the aisles. Sent on in advance to announce the arrival of the wedding party, he was waiting to take his place in the procession. Being one of the General's best men, he had a small bunch of orange-flowers coquettishly placed on his tunic, beside his golden aiguillettes.

On finding herself in front of him Sarah started, and, all her blood rushing to her heart, she turned very pale. Being superstitious, she beheld a fatal presentiment in this meeting with one who troubled her so gravely. It seemed to her that Pierre was inevitably destined to be ever present in her existence, and to bring on misfortune. She trembled, then, seized with a sudden fit of anger which made her eyes sparkle, she darted a threatening look at the young man, and proudly raising her head, walked resolutely towards the high altar. The organ was now sending from the vaulted roof a grave and penetrating melody. And again seized by the solemn splendour of the ceremony, dazzled by the lights, intoxicated by the odour of the incense, enveloped by the stifled and caressing murmur of the crowd, Sarah forgot him whom she wished to hate, and kneeling by the Count's side, wrapped in deep meditation, seized by an unknown religious fervour, she ardently prayed that Heaven might bless their union.

Other prayers were being offered up to Heaven at the same time.

Apart from the crowd of wedding guests, Blanche, with her friend Madeleine beside her, was kneeling in the aisle at the foot of the pulpit. Lulled by the chanting, her thoughts became exalted, and it seemed to her that her prayers ascended to the feet of the Creator in the blue cloud which arose from the gently-swayed silver censer. She prayed from the depth of her heart for her uncle. She was full of gratitude towards him, for he was the first one who had spoken to her in tender and affectionate language. She could just remember a pale and sad woman, who used to take her on her lap, when very young, and whose melancholy songs lulled her pain, and whose kisses dried her tears. She knew that this woman was her mother, but not a feature of her countenance remained in her memory. She could only remember her sadness and paleness. She was not happy. Alas ! And Blanche, with an ardent outburst of her heart, mentally prayed : " My God, I who am alone, who hold to nothing and who am indifferent to all, if someone must suffer, I beseech you to let your hand fall on me, and let those who are bowing down before you to-day be happy ! "

A soft, harmonious voice drew her from her deep meditation. "For the poor, if you please!" it said.

The beadle, in full uniform, struck his halberd on the floor as if to support this demand with an imperious summons. Blanche raised her eyes, and through her crape veil she recognised, a few steps from her, the young man she had seen in the cemetery, Pierre Séverac, leading a young lady, elegantly dressed in a pink costume, and who held out the velvet bag in which the silver coins jingled. Mademoiselle de Cygne started on seeing Pierre and the young girl hand in hand. Her heart sank painfully within her, and a sudden unknown bitterness rose to her lips. She cast a long look at the charming couple, and taking a gold coin from her purse, she dropped it into the bag.

"Thank you, madame," said Séverac, who did not recognise Mademoiselle de Cygne under her black veil.

And guiding his young companion through the rows of chairs, he continued the collection.

"Did you recognise him?" whispered Madeleine to her companion. "It is Monsieur Séverac, the Count's aide-de-camp."

"And the young girl?" asked Mademoiselle de Cygne, after a slight hesitation.

"She is the Countess de Brivade's daughter. She is going to be married shortly."

"Who to?" asked Blanche, in a trembling voice.

"To Monsieur de —— I don't remember who. He is something in the Audit Office. Very rich, and a splendid future, so papa says"

Blanche sighed. An ardent blush suffused her cheeks, and lowering her eyes, which were sparkling with joy, she knelt down again, and appeared to be deeply engaged in prayer.

CHAPTER VIII

ON the morrow of his marriage the Count took up his quarters with his young wife at Canalheilles. Spring was returning, and casting her green mantle over wood and

plain. The lilac was in flower, loading the air with its delicate perfume; the bushes of red may, laden with bloom, resembled enormous bouquets. In the orchards the apple-trees, white with blossoms, seemed to have retained some of the winter's snow on their knotty branches.

This first awakening of nature from the torpidity of the cold season seemed full of charm to Sarah. Through her open window the fresh, pure morning air enveloped her with its vivifying breath. Her young blood flowed more briskly through her veins, and seized with a sudden wish to join in this festival of nature, she twisted her golden hair into a knot, girded her morning-gown about her waist with a belt of Russia leather, and taking a parasol went downstairs alone to pay a first visit to her new domain.

In the centre of the courtyard some swans were swimming, grave and stately, around the bronze Tritons of the ornamental water. From time to time one of them, noticing with his piercing eye a roach imprudently passing within his reach, would dive, plunging his graceful neck below the surface, and displaying his white tail above the water like a bishop's mitre. The slight ripple produced by the motion of his feet formed silvery circles around him. Over the large gravelled square, bordered by hundred-year-old trees, a solemn calmness reigned.

Sarah walked for some time amongst the flower-beds, watching the butterflies hovering over them, and the bees robbing the roses of their honey. There was a small door in the wall; she opened it, and found herself in the kitchen garden. The green beds, bordered with thyme and pinks, succeeded one another, displaying their fertile riches. Amidst the green leaves of the cabbages the dew had collected in drops which at each breath of air scattered like liquid diamonds. An old gardener, leaning on his spade, followed with his eyes the movements of his three assistants, who were placing glass melon-shades upon a thick bed of manure, and snappishly gave them various instructions, which they received with the respectful deference due to a servant whose hair had whitened in one employment. On perceiving Sarah the old man briskly removed his broad-brimmed straw hat, and bareheaded beneath the sun and

red with pleasure, advanced towards his young mistress. He broke into thanks for the kindness shown by the Countess in condescending on the very first morning to visit his beds before even going to see the hothouses. And the old vegetable grower expanded with pride at the thought of this snub to the head of the flower garden, a puffed-up Dutchman, who would not even deign to speak to his colleague.

"If madame is not afraid of wetting her feet, I shall have the honour of showing her a very curious variety of beetroot. It is the largest beetroot known, a creation of the late Count, the General's father—a true connoisseur, and fond of new varieties."

"You were in the service of my husband's father, then?" inquired Sarah graciously.

"Yes, madame, under the orders of my poor father. We have been gardeners at Canalheilles from father to son," added the old fellow proudly. "It was my grandfather who looked after the Chateau during the Revolution. Good soil, madame. We grow the finest sweet-water grapes of anywhere round Fontainebleau. They send to us for slips from Thomery. Oh, the Canalheilles grapes are well known!"

As he walked along, the old man plucked some of the pinks from his beds and made a pretty bouquet. He tied it up with a strip of withy, and offering it to Sarah with a smile, said:

"We have no rare flowers here as in the hothouses, but these are some double pinks that are worth something."

Sarah took the bouquet, and raising it to her face inhaled its rich perfume.

"The scent is delicious," said she.

The old gardener bowed with tender humility, and added:

"And they are offered from the bottom of the heart."

The Countess smiled. The simple homage of this old servant filled her heart with sweet tranquillity. She felt herself surrounded with respect and affection. It seemed to her that she occupied an impregnable, firm, and powerful position, like a young *chatelaine* amongst her vassals. She,

who since her adoptive mother's death had lived like the bird on the bough, only alighting for a moment, and off again at the first caprice, found a delightful enjoyment at seeing herself in possession of a strong and stable position. She felt rested. She said to herself that for the future nothing could hinder her from living peaceably and happily in this vast domain. Penetrated, conquered by the charms of nature, a deep peacefulness came over her. Partly overcome by the sunshine, as she stood between the espaliers that concentrated the heat, and intoxicated by the air, she experienced one of the sweetest sensations of material well-being she had ever known. The Count's cheerful voice roused her from this species of somnolence.

"Well, dear, so you are confabulating with Jean. He is a capital fellow, and knows how to grow green peas that melt in your mouth like sweetmeats. And you, you old flatterer, you have been giving flowers, I see, to the Countess," continued the General, turning to the gardener. "Quite right. Send your granddaughters up to the Chateau after breakfast, the Countess will be pleased to see them. For this old dog is a grandfather, my dear. Ah! that does not make me any younger. We used to play together, and he's not more than two or three years older than I am."

"Oh! General, ten at least."

"You are flattering me, you old rascal!" said the General gaily. "It is because the Countess is present. It is trouble thrown away. She knows I have grey hairs."

"Such as you are, you are worth many youngsters," retorted the old servant with respectful familiarity.

"That's not so sure. But all the same I don't dislike hearing it said."

And gallantly offering Sarah his arm, the General added:

"Since you have begun your tour of inspection, dear, will you go on with it? We have still a couple of hours to spare before breakfast. Come and take a turn round the park."

A little English trap, with a hog-maned cob in the shafts, was waiting at the side entrance in charge of a top-booted groom.

"We will go alone, Harry," said the Count, after consulting the Countess with a look.

And gathering up the reins, happy to have this charming woman by his side all to himself, and pleased as a schoolboy out for a holiday, the Count started the pony, which was champing its bit with impatience, at a trot.

The park unfolded before them the verdant depths of its broad avenues, with their turf fine and smooth as a carpet. The branches of the trees formed a vault overhead, through the interstices of which the sun shot his rays like shafts of gold. The wood-pigeons on the branches of the tall oaks cooed softly, and the rabbits, startled from the edge of the track, after awaiting the approach of the trap with an air of mingled curiosity and impudence, bounded into the woods, showing their white tails. The avenue ended in a clearing whence several others branched off. In the centre was a rustic summer-house, with a covered outer gallery. From this elevated spot there was a charming view. To the left, through a broad opening, one caught sight of the slopes of Chartrette and the course of the Seine. Between the banks, dotted with white houses with red-tiled roofs, the river wound along, like a silver ribbon, reflecting the blue sky on its bosom, and seeming to tear itself with regret from the caressing embrace of the reeds and water-lilies. To the right, the eyes were caught in the foreground by the dense and gloomy forest growth surrounding the Carrefour de la Table du Roi. Then, the ground beyond sloping abruptly, there rose above the tree-tops the heights of the Gorges d'Apremont, crowned with heather and dotted with blocks of sandstone. As in presence of certain views in the Tyrol, widespread and far-stretching, Sarah felt her breathing oppressed by a sense of immensity into which it seemed she was about to plunge. She ascended the steps of the summer-house, and sat down on one of the seats of the gallery. There she remained for some time, absorbed in the contemplation of this beautiful picture, abandoning herself to the mystic charm of this vast horizon.

She was quite dizzy when the Count, taking her by the hand, aroused her from this contemplation. They went into the summer-house. Solidly reared on a stone foundation, this building of rustic aspect was a masterpiece of comfort and luxury as regards its interior. It was furnished

throughout in the Chinese style. The hangings were of Beauvais tapestry from designs by Coypel, representing a lady of the Celestial Empire borne by a dozen attendants in her palanquin. Her husband, a mandarin with a crystal button and long Tartar moustache, followed the procession on horseback, with his sabre clashing against his thigh. In the rear came a group of young girls carrying bouquets of lotus flowers and feather fans. The furniture was of lacquer, enriched with gold. A splendid bronze lantern, with coloured glass panes, hung from the roof. Silken curtains shaded the windows, and thick mats of plaited straw deadened the sound of footsteps. This octagonal room, each window of which looked on to a different view, formed indeed a most delightful retreat.

Fatigued by her morning walk, Sarah sank upon a sofa covered with a pretty figured stuff, and remained motionless, with dreamy eyes, during some seconds of exquisite repose. The Count had sat down beside her, and gazed on her with admiration. Leaning back against the cushions, her bosom, the bold outline of which was modelled by the soft material of her morning-gown, rose and fell with her regular respiration. Her tight skirt showed the shape of her legs, and displayed her neat ankles in blue stockings, and her little feet in high-heeled shoes with pebble buckles. One hand in its Swedish kid glove hung down by her side. The Count took this hand in his own, and turning down the upper part of the glove, softly pressed his lips to the fresh round arm. His kisses, slowly taken, with exquisite relish, ascended from the wrist to the elbow, causing the blue-veined skin to quiver beneath them.

Sarah started, and turning her glance, saw the Count almost on his knees, his head close to her shoulder, intent on his amorous occupation. A flush had risen to the old man's cheeks, and his arm was already straying round his young wife's waist. The Count's age was abruptly revealed to Sarah. She saw his forehead furrowed with wrinkles, the crows'-feet at the corner of his eyes, and his white hair. She had never till this been struck by the marked contrast between her own youth and her husband's great age. But now, delicate as had been his assumption of

ownership, and reserved as had been his tender caresses, she reflected with alarm that she was his, and that she would have to share his existence, and submit to his love. She rose suddenly, and turning to her husband, who had smilingly drawn himself up, she said :

“ We had better get home. I must dress myself.”

And followed by the Count she returned to the trap, the pony having filled up the time by cropping young leaves from the boughs. Sarah’s gaiety had vanished. She passed the rest of the day in her room, stretched back in a lounging chair, skimming through a new novel. Evening restored her to the Count in the vast dining-room where thirty guests could have dined at ease. The approach of night had rendered her very serious. The Count on his part redoubled his gallantry, and displayed all his graces.

The hour seemed interminable to Sarah. To avoid an alarming proximity like that of the morning, she seated herself at the piano and played some of Chopin’s waltzes, to which the Count listened, plunged in ineffable beatitude. Little by little the old man’s head sank back, and under the influence of the warm atmosphere of the room, he fell asleep before the fire which had been lighted, as the evenings were still cold. Sarah now played more softly, soothing her husband’s slumbers, her eyes aglow with malicious pleasure at seeing the man whose attempts she had feared at her mercy. Then she left off, and in the silence the heavy breathing of the sleeper was alone audible. The clock striking awoke the Count. He rose rapidly, and seeing Sarah, who was smiling before him, he reddened with confusion.

“ Excuse me, dear,” he said. “ It seems to me that I have been dozing. What time is it ? ”

“ Eleven o’clock. The country air has had the same effect upon you as on myself,” said Sarah. “ I am dying with fatigue ; and I think the best thing to do will be for each of us to go to our bedrooms.”

This “ each of us to go to our bedrooms,” spoken in the most natural fashion in the world, but which so clearly laid down the situation, caused the Count to raise his eyes. He saw Sarah hiding a slight yawn behind her hand. With

some little bitterness he realised that the projects of gallantry which he had cherished would not be opportune. And stifling a sigh he accompanied his young wife, who proceeded towards her room. At the top of the staircase the Countess stopped, and offering her forehead to her husband with a smile, said :

“ Good-night.”

And with a coquettish gesture she disappeared. The Count went into his spacious apartment, which he found cold and gloomy. He thought melancholily of the time when he did not fall asleep after dinner, and when the ladies always found him ready to chat agreeably, or inclined for a waltz. He cast a look at the glass and saw himself, stout, red-faced, and white-moustached. He was certainly no longer the dashing, wasp-waisted lieutenant who rode so brilliantly at the Croix-de-Berny. He threw himself into an arm-chair, and found this much compensation in his solitude, that he could light a cigar.

Dreamily watching the blue smoke rising to the ceiling in fleecy curls, he thought over matters. He feared he had gone a little too far in the summer-house, and had rendered Sarah uneasy. He regretted it. Had he not, at his age, assumed the airs of a Romeo, and rested his old head on the shoulder of that charming child like a lover of twenty ? He had shown himself ridiculous, if not odious. And that very evening, a few minutes before stretching himself in that comfortable arm-chair and enjoying that excellent cigar, had he not again entertained notions of gallantry ? Was this the result of his reasoning ? Was this how he remained faithful to the programme he had unfolded to Merlot when the latter combated the notion of his marriage ? “ I shall have a daughter in her,” he had said. “ She will surround my old age with tenderness and care.” Ah ! he had behaved very much like a father ! If he might hope to possess this charming woman, ought he not to do so only through her goodwill and tender resignation ? Could he hope to win her otherwise than by attentions of every moment, and care incessantly renewed ? Had he the right to expect love ? He found himself coarse and brutal, and trembled at the thought of having compromised, in a single

moment, all the charming intimacy and happiness he had dreamt of. He vowed to himself that he would be patient and paternal, and win Sarah through gratitude, if she were destined to be his.

Having formed these good resolutions, he felt relieved. He opened his window. The moon silvered the dark tree clumps of the park. The nightingale was singing in the coppice. A deep calm reigned around, and amidst the silence one could hear the jingling of the bells on the harness of some horse passing along the road nearly a mile off. The General drew the fresh air into his lungs with enjoyment. Though never much given to reverie, he remained leaning on the balcony, wrapped in thought and watching the stars shining in the transparent heavens. He experienced a sensation of overflowing contentment. He found life delightful, and nature attractive. He felt himself good, ready for all kinds of devotion, all manner of sacrifice, in order to see Sarah always with unclouded brow and smiling lips.

He turned his glance towards that part of the house where her room was situated. The windows were still lit up. He pictured her to himself reclining beneath the embroidered coverlet of her Louis Seize bed, resting one bare arm on the lace-edged pillow, and reading before going to sleep. He saw in fancy the little slippers on the white bearskin serving as a rug, and the dressing-gown of pink Chinese silk trimmed with Valenciennes lace, still retaining in its folds some of its wearer's warmth, lying on an arm-chair. The light blue silk stockings were coiled on the carpet beside the satin garters. The fair sleeper's golden tresses glittered in the shadow of the curtains, and her white neck seemed awaiting kisses. The Count quivered with rapture, his blood flowed more quickly through his veins, his fingers tingled, and, despite himself, his eyes remained fixed upon the windows behind which his imagination had revealed to him such a seductive picture. He made an effort, however, and tore himself away from this contemplation. Then passing his hand across his forehead :

"This is stupid," he said ; "I am exciting myself like a schoolboy."

He smiled sadly, and added :

“ True, old men become childish.”

And raising his fingers to his lips, he threw a kiss to Sarah, murmuring : “ Sleep in peace, dear child.”

Then he closed the window and retired to rest.

On the morrow Sarah found the Count gay, smiling, and charming, but full of caution. Not a word, not a gesture to recall the two moments of intoxication during which he had shown himself so inclined to encroach. As on the day before, they went out together, rambling through the woods, rowing on the lake, visiting the pheasant preserves, and questioning the farmers as to the prospects of the crops.

This life, so calm and full of repose, did not satisfy Sarah for more than a couple of days. The domain that she had thought so beautiful in its seignorial grandeur, and in the expansion of its worth, seemed to her sad and dull. She felt lost in the vast rooms of the Chateau, and, alone in the portrait gallery, she felt oppressed as it were by the glances of all the ancestors, from the crusading counts, sheathed in steel, down to that gallant powder-haired De Canalheilles, who wore so gracefully the uniform of Lambesq's dragoons.

Sarah's ardent nature had need of movement and noise. The solitude and the silence crushed her. She became taciturn, no longer spoke, and would not go out. She passed her day in her room stretched on her lounging chair, with her back to the windows. She tried to read a few pages of a book, or a few lines of a paper. But the book or paper soon escaped from her fingers, and fell on to the carpet. And she remained for long hours motionless, her eyes half closed—not asleep, but letting her thoughts stray far from the groves of Canalheilles.

The Count grew uneasy at this. He was afraid that Sarah was ill. He questioned her. She answered, mildly, that she did not feel ill, but that she was suffering from a sense of lassitude—a torpor that she could not overcome. She apologised for being such bad company, and begged her husband to go out without her, and not to trouble to combat her bad habits. The Count, very uneasy, feared that she had the spleen. He asked himself whether the

sudden change in her existence was not the cause of the state in which she was, and resolved to take her back to Paris.

Sarah agreed to this return without enthusiasm, for all things seemed indifferent to her. However, the movement of the great city soon laid hold of her again. When on the morrow of their taking up their quarters in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, she drove out with the Count, about three o'clock, in a landau drawn by two splendid black horses, and found herself in the Champs Elysées amidst the stream of equipages rolling towards the Bois de Boulogne, she experienced real pleasure. Her complexion recovered its brilliancy; her eyes sparkled. And the Count joyfully witnessed this resurrection of the Sarah who had so charmed him.

Paris is in the springtime in all the brilliancy of its splendour and its luxury. The great world has returned from the southern wintering places, the rich foreigners have arrived, and for some weeks, until the day the Grand Prix is run for, the pulse of the city is at its highest.

Sarah therefore returned at the most brilliant hour; she arrived when the festival was at its height. And her beauty soon pointed her out for universal admiration. She was looked upon with bitter jealousy or passionately extolled. In a few days, thanks to the excitement of pleasure, she recovered her good humour, and her health became flourishing. The General, fairly radiant, resumed his place in the fashionable circle in which he had formerly moved, and was sought after because of his affable courtesy, and surrounded on account of his young wife. Finding ample entertainment himself, he thought that he had discovered the real element that suited Sarah. And without an effort, as without fears, he lent himself to the impatient outbreaks of her strong and passionate youth.

Sarah's existence thus became an unbroken succession of pleasures. Launched into the whirl of society, she let herself be borne along with all the ardour of her temperament. She was adorable and adored. She was all the rage, and the most elegant and beautiful women had to acknowledge her sovereignty. With such a large fortune at her disposal,

she had no need to calculate her expenditure, and was able to gratify her most costly fancies. She maintained, however, perfect taste in her luxury. With a tact rare in a foreigner, she affected a style of costly simplicity, and never gave an opportunity for sneers. The Count, besides, was an excellent guide for her, and gave her the enlightened advice of a man of position accustomed by traditional elegance never to overstep the proper limit. This life, full of crushing fatigues, for few labourers exert themselves harder at their work than people of fashion in their pleasures, suited Sarah admirably. She was wholly taken up with it.

Since she had returned to Paris, the Countess had scarcely met Séverac. The young officer came every morning for his orders, often worked with the General, and his work once accomplished withdrew. Never, despite the Count's entreaties, would he consent to stay to breakfast. He had always a good excuse to give, friends who were expecting him or an errand to execute in a hurry. The Count, aware of Sarah's lurking hostility, dared not force Pierre to meet her. Regular, methodical, and calm, Séverac came, worked, and went away at fixed hours, passing quietly through the house, and never raising his voice if he had any instructions to give to the orderly waiting in the courtyard.

The Countess was soon aware of the officer's habits. She heard his light step when he passed along the corridor leading from the Count's study to the main staircase. She often stood behind the closed door of her boudoir, ready to open it in order to find herself face to face with him, and to scan him haughtily. She was irritated at never discovering him in the wrong. His perfection exasperated her. She would have liked to have been able to say to the General, "Monsieur Séverac has done so-and-so, which is not right."

She had not the chance.

Once or twice about eleven o'clock, when she was returning from her ride with the Count, she had found Séverac walking amongst the flower-beds in the gravelled courtyard. He had on these occasions bowed to her respectfully. It was in vain that she responded by a disdainful and scarcely polite acknowledgment. Nothing

on the young officer's face betrayed his impressions. He remained impassible.

Haunted by the thought of Séverac, pursued by his face, Sarah saw her repose really disturbed. With the superstitious ideas inherited from her race, she beheld in the young officer an enemy to be got rid of at any price. Living amongst a wild gypsy tribe, she would have pointed him out for the knife of one of her comrades. Placed in polished society, in which one fights with smiles and slays with words, she had to content herself with a drawing-room battle, and resolved to do everything to force Séverac to disappear. Pierre had from the outset noted Sarah's animosity. He had in vain sought for its motive. He came to the conclusion that he was personally objectionable to the Countess, and retired within himself. Since the scene at the Pandolfini Palace he had formed the resolution to keep in the background, and never give the Countess an occasion of manifesting her antipathy. Of a very affectionate disposition, though outwardly cold, Pierre suffered greatly from the constraint he had to impose upon himself. He was quite ready to feel a fraternal affection for Sarah. Her beauty and her grace of manner charmed him. And when she was enjoying herself at a ball, with all the unrestraint of her ardent nature, he took great pleasure in watching her as she whirled away in a waltz, her eyes half closed, and her figure gracefully reclining against her partner's arm. Having a deep affection for the General, he would have been pleased to have been treated with kindness by the Countess. He would have welcomed in her with pleasure the frank friendship of a companion. This hate, the source of which he could not imagine, weighed heavily upon him. He had the idea of leaving the General and joining his regiment, but the fear of appearing touchy and ungrateful decided him to remain. He waited, feeling certain that some day or other the storm that was brewing could not fail to burst forth, and he reserved for that moment his firm resolve to act. He would then have every reason in the world to leave. But he was determined not to give any chance to the Countess's hostility, in order to keep the right wholly on his side.

In June, a splendid entertainment was given at the English Embassy. The Prince and Princess of Wales had come to Paris to be present at the race for the Grand Prix, which it seemed certain would be won that year by an English horse. The diplomatic representative of the United Kingdom had profited by this opportunity to invite the Parisian world of fashion and the cream of the foreign colony. Marshal de MacMahon, then President of the Republic, had promised to be present. Invitations had been fought for furiously. A brilliant crowd was gathered in the splendid saloons of the Embassy. In the courtyard a flooring had been laid down on a level with the windows of the rooms, converting it into a ballroom magnificently decorated and dazzlingly lit up. There dancing was in progress. Despite the suffocating heat, couples began to form about two in the morning, and Waldteufel's musicians, who had been uselessly exerting themselves since the beginning of the evening, recovered their courage.

Sarah, beaming with loveliness, clad in a white dress that displayed her superb shoulders, and wearing a diamond crescent in her golden hair, had made her entrance on the Count's arm, awakening enthusiastic exclamations on her passage. Séverac, for whom the General had procured an invitation, had arrived early, and after having wandered through the saloons transformed into vapour baths, had stepped out under the verandah to get a little fresh air. He was slowly returning, when he saw Monsieur and Madame de Canalheilles. He followed them a little in their rear, pleased to see the General radiant, and admiring Sarah's light and undulating gait. The orchestra was playing a waltz in the adjacent ballroom, and gusts of melody rose above the murmur of the conversation. It was difficult to move amidst the dense crowd. From a distance Séverac could perceive the glittering crescent in Sarah's hair, and followed it like a sailor with his eye fixed upon a star.

Sarah reached the saloon set aside for their Royal Highnesses and the personages of distinction present at the entertainment. The Prince, with exquisite grace, advanced a few steps towards the Count, whom he knew,

and, turning to his fair companion, expressed a wish to present her to the Princess. With eyes aglow, proud of her triumph, certain of her loveliness, Sarah looked truly dazzling. Lost in a group, and chatting with an attaché of the Embassy, whom he had known at Rome, Séverac, forgetting his grudges, was sincerely pleased at the Countess's success. Standing near the door he followed her with his glance, listening inattentively to his companion, and absorbed by the charm of the spectacle before his eyes.

Sarah having briefly answered the gracious remarks addressed to her by the Princess made a deep curtsy, and passing onward amidst bows and compliments, was making her way towards the exit, followed by the Count. In a moment the expression of her face changed. She had just perceived Séverac upright on her passage like a disturbing element. The Countess's look grew gloomy, her brows contracted, and her face assumed an expression of extraordinary harshness as she walked straight towards the young officer, who drew aside to let her pass.

Her fan that she was handling nervously slipped from her fingers and rolled on the floor. Before Séverac even had time to make a movement, she glanced at him over her shoulder, and with magnificent impertinence, let fall these words :

"Pick that up, please."

In the group of gentlemen near which the young officer was standing there was a low murmur of surprise, scarcely louder than a breath. Everyone felt a momentary discomfort. Séverac grew pale. But setting his lips as though to keep back words ready to break forth, he took the fan, and emphasising by his respect the affront just put upon him, he handed it to the Countess. Then, still bending before her,

"You are on the point of leaving, madame?" said he, in a low voice. "I will therefore tell your coachman to draw up."

And as the Countess made a movement,

"It is my duty," he added bitterly, "since you treat me like a valet."

And he retired. The Count, detained on his passage,

had witnessed this scene from a distance. He managed to get away, and hurried to his wife.

"What is the matter?" he asked uneasily.

"Nothing," said Sarah. "Monsieur Séverac, very punctilious as usual, has stupidly taken offence because I asked him to pick up my fan."

And cutting short any explanation, she added .

"But our people must be there. Let us go."

And she led off the Count, who anxiously asked himself how Sarah could have insulted Séverac.

CHAPTER IX

THE Captain, feeling cruelly hurt, had left the British Embassy, filled with a sense of lively irritation. He was living in the Rue des Pyramides, close to the Church of St Roch, and returned home on foot. As he walked down the Faubourg Saint-Honoré he reflected. Decidedly the measure was full to overflowing.

It would be impossible for him in the future to remain with the General under the humiliating circumstances in which the Countess's animosity placed him. Had he been more of a libertine, Séverac would perhaps have fathomed the spite of a slighted woman beneath Sarah's outbreaks. But, simple and straightforward, he only saw an antipathy, the cause of which he was powerless to divine. Its effects, however, were too undeniable for him to be able to continue to submit to them without disgrace.

Soothed by exercise, refreshed by the open air, he reached home very calm but very decided, resolved to see the General that very day in order to ask leave from him to return to his regiment.

By ten in the morning he had just finished dressing, and was preparing to go out, when there came a ring at the door of his rooms. He opened it and found himself face to face with the General and Merlot. In the street under the window, their horses, held by a groom, were pawing the

ground impatiently, their hoofs ringing on the stones. The young man made a movement of surprise.

"Ah! you are astonished to see me here?" said the Count, smiling; "I seem to be the Captain and you the General. I wish to goodness it were so."

"Very much better off you would be then!" growled Merlot. "Do you think you would do any differently than you have done?"

"No, but I should have the pleasure of doing it all over again. And then I should be forty years younger. Do you think that we are pretty to look at?"

"I think that I am very well as I am. For the life I lead I have no need to be good-looking. I have no longer any affectations. It is twenty years since I ran after women."

"Oh! yes, you're a privileged being, you are," said the General, laughing, "an epitome of all moral perfections. You have, above all, the amiability of a bull-dog and the softness of a currycomb. But never mind all that. My dear Séverac, I am here in the capacity of an ambassador. There was a little misunderstanding yesterday between the Countess and you. And I come on her behalf to express her regret."

Pierre, who had been leaning against the mantelpiece, made a step forward; he turned very red, and with a protesting gesture,

"General, I must beg of you," he said. "Really, it is lending too much importance to a very slight matter. Believe me, that I know how insignificant I am in the Countess's eyes to have dreamt for a moment of the shadow of any ill intention on her part. She would not even stoop to wound me wilfully."

"Oh, oh!" interrupted the General, "there is a great deal of bitterness in this. Pierre, my friend, I do not find you such as I should have wished. Come, it is more serious than the Countess gave me to understand. I noticed that there was something unpleasant between you, and I questioned the Countess. She asserts that you gave a wrong interpretation to some very harmless words."

"That must be so," said Séverac coldly, "since Madame de Canalheilles says it. But as it is to be feared my intelli-

gence will not undergo any further development, a similar error might occur again, and I should be deeply vexed to be a source of annoyance to the Countess. It will be wiser for me to go away, and I regret, General, to have to ask you for leave."

"Leave!" exclaimed the Count, starting up abruptly. "What do you mean by that? Are you thinking of quitting me?"

"It would be with great regret," answered Séverac, with emotion, "for I feel a deep affection and a strong sense of gratitude towards you, General. When I had the misfortune to lose my father I found him again in you. Believe me, that my heart's dearest wish was never to leave you."

Merlot, purple in the face, and struggling against the emotion that was assailing him, cleared his choking throat with a "Hem," which sounded as hoarsely as the growl of a tiger. For a moment the three men gazed at one another without daring to say a word. Pierre, standing with bent head, stared hard at the carpet. The General paced up and down thoughtfully, and with a lowering brow.

He recovered his self-possession the first.

"You are ridiculous," he said roughly to Séverac, "you give way to a moment's temper. I will not allow it. I have some authority over you, I suppose. Where will you go if you leave me? To join a staff in the provinces? What will be thought of such a thing?"

"No, General, if I leave you it will be to see some service. I shall ask to go to Africa"

"Good!" cried Merlot, who drew himself up as though moved by a spring. "Bravo, Séverac! Africa has been our best school of warfare. All young fellows ought to go through the mill. Go; you are right, my boy."

"What are you meddling about?" retorted the General. "Has anyone asked your advice?"

"I don't need to be asked for it—I give it."

"Come, Pierre," resumed the Count, "would you, on account of so slight a motive, cause me so much pain? Must I have the regret of thinking that the Countess has deprived me of the pleasure of keeping you near me?"

Your father, had he lived, would certainly have asked me to guide you in your career. It was a very pleasant duty I was fulfilling in looking after your future. You hurt me very much. I know what it has been from the very first between Sarah and yourself. There has never been a good understanding between you. Yet she is the best of women, and you have an excellent temper. But you are too shy, too retiring; you have never ventured on the slightest attempt to render yourself welcome to her. You stayed sulking in your corner. Don't say no; I have eyes—I saw you. Whatever has happened, my dear lad, you were the cause of it."

Led away by his love for Sarah, wishing to find extenuating circumstances in her favour, the Count had got so far as to accuse Séverac.

"I will punish myself for it, then," said Pierre; "that will be only just."

"No, for it will not be yourself whom you will punish, it will be me. I appeal to your friendship, my dear lad. Everything is due to a misunderstanding which has lasted too long. I have argued with the Countess; I have even scolded her. And as she is very good-hearted she wishes to repair the evil. Go and see her shortly, you can both have an explanation. You will make it up; and when you know how to appreciate one another, you will be good friends. And then, if you are positively bent on going away to Algeria, well, later on—say in a year's time—I promise that you shall start as soon as you ask to. But not now, I beg of you."

Séverac remained downcast and silent; he did not wish to go to the Countess's. A secret uneasiness had seized on him at the idea of finding himself alone with her. He saw her pass before him in his mind as she had appeared at the ball, with her dress revealing her adorable shoulders, and her luminous crescent glittering like a star above her fair forehead. She smiled, and her lips shaped themselves voluptuously as for a kiss. Her eyes of changeful blue were full of mockery. They fixed themselves upon him as though in defiance. The fan which she had made him pick up fluttered in her hand like the wing of a bird, and

the rich lace bordering her corsage waved softly about her exquisite throat.

Pierre shuddered, and passing his hand across his forehead, as though to drive away this charming vision, remained absorbed in thought, striving to restrain the beatings of his heart, which throbbed to suffocation.

"Come, Séverac," said the General, "do this for me. Give me this token of deference. I have pledged myself on your behalf, and she is expecting you. You will offend her on your side if you do not go. Come, is it agreed?"

Séverac still hesitated at answering. He heard a voice from within him calling, "Do not go!" He was ashamed, however, of yielding to such puerile fears; he was afraid of vexing the Count, and so making up his mind he said, in a low voice:

"Very well, General, I will obey you."

"That's right," cried the General joyfully. "After such a promise, off we go, Merlot, for a gallop to the cascade. Make yourself easy; the horse you are riding has been taken out for a couple of hours this morning. He won't play you any tricks."

"Do you think I need to have horses prepared for me like that?" cried Merlot furiously. "General of cavalry though you may be, do you want to see an infantry Colonel show you the way? Come to the training-course of the Cercle des Patineurs, and I'll back myself against you to take every jump."

"No, don't do that. You would have to be taken home in a cab," said the General, laughing.

And grasping Séverac's hand, he darted down the stairs, followed by Merlot, who was growling about those swaggering old huzzars, who were full of pretension, but who rode like pairs of tongs.

Séverac, left alone, felt as tired as if he had had a hard run. He stretched himself on the sofa, and with his eyes open began to reflect deeply. The difficulties of his situation with regard to the Count since the latter's marriage seemed to him unbearable. He said to himself that to stay would only be to increase them. It would be necessary to go some time or other. To a young fellow of

his age a life in common with this old man and this young woman would be impossible

He did not wish to remain near the Countess. He felt instinctively that she was dangerous, and prudently sought to retreat. Sarah, a strange, seductive, and, above all, imperious creature, could not tolerate indifference. She must be loved or hated. He had no reason for hating her, and he was too straightforward to make love to her. Moreover, someone else would certainly one day be less scrupulous than himself, and he would have to stand by, silent and impassive, to witness the Count's conjugal misfortunes. And he could not make up his mind to that either.

There was only one course to take, and he firmly decided on it. He would call on the Countess since he had promised to do so; he would make all the concessions she wished, and a month later he would ask the General to fulfil the engagement he had undertaken and facilitate his departure for Algeria.

The clock striking twelve recalled him to the realities of life. He rose briskly, took his hat, cane and gloves, and went out to lunch.

Sarah on her part had woke up in a very bad temper. There shone in her eyes a reddish light which good old Stewart knew well, and that was the foreboding sign of one of the famous electric crises during which it seemed as if the beautiful Englishwoman was possessed of a devil.

The Count, on entering her room on his return from his ride, found her wrapped in a morning-gown of ruby plush, embroidered with gold, her arms bare, her hair hanging down her back, and her whole person resplendent with so strange a beauty that he remained struck with admiration. He seemed to see the young priestess of a pagan faith preparing to sing the praises of her god in some barbaric tongue.

He took her by the hand, and leading her to the tall cheval-glass, said, with admiration :

"Look at yourself, dear; you are really like the Witch of Endor."

"Otherwise a fortune-teller," answered she, laughing.
"Well, you are not far from the truth. I have the blood

of prophetesses in my veins. Who knows! I was perhaps intended to tell fortunes with cards and to read the future in coffee-dregs? I have often seen my mother do so for a few pence. She had a toad as large as my two hands, whose yellow eyes frightened me, and who used to walk about mystic squares traced on the sand. It seems that he was a sorcerer, and knew the secrets of destiny. I ought to have put his science to the test, when a child, and have discovered what was to happen to me."

She broke into a nervous laugh, which wrung the Count's heart.

"What is the matter, Sarah?" asked the old man gently. "I do not like to see you like this. Are you ill?"

"No," she said, recovering her seriousness; "but there is a storm in the air, and I feel stifled. I do not know what fancy possessed me to put on such a warm gown. I will take it off and wear something lighter. Oh! do not go, you are not in the way. I can talk from my dressing-room."

She went into the adjoining apartment, where the Count could hear her opening and shutting cupboards and drawers.

Then she suddenly asked, as if she had made up her mind to broach the subject preoccupying her.

"Well, and that great favourite of yours, Monsieur Séverac, what did he say to you?"

"My dear, he wanted to leave for Algeria; I had all the trouble in the world to get him to stay."

"Ah!" said Sarah ironically. "He deigned to consent. Really I am grateful to him for his clemency. Do you know, he is positively ridiculous? There is a frightful amount of pride in that young gentleman."

"I beg you, dear, not to be prejudiced against him," said the General mildly. "He is coming to see you in the course of the day. I promised him that you would receive him kindly. Do not fail in the engagement I have undertaken in your name; you would vex me."

Sarah reappeared clad in a dress of pink Chinese silk, trimmed with Venetian point, her face smiling and open. She was no longer the gloomy and foredoomed woman whom he had seen a few moments before, but a careless and happy young girl. The Count was struck by the

metamorphosis. Sarah, a veritable Proteus, mobile and changeable, astonished him by her sudden alterations of temper and the brusque variations of her physiognomy.

She did not reply to the request addressed to her, but taking the Count's arm she led him quickly in the direction of the dining-room. During the meal she was very lively, but her gaiety was a little forced. She was preoccupied and uneasy. There was some inward trouble which she strove to hide. The Count, however, enchanted to find her so good-tempered, failed to discern the agitation hidden beneath this apparent calm. Quite reassured, he went off to the Ministry of War to pass the day in sitting on a committee.

Once alone, Sarah breathed freely. Séverac was coming ; and she would at length have this enigmatic personage at her will and pleasure. She would be able to penetrate into this mind which had so far been a sealed book to her.

She ascribed the emotion she felt to curiosity. Perhaps there would be a struggle between her and this obstinate fellow. She was, however, resolved to tame him. He would have to ask her pardon, and recognise the all-powerfulness of her feminine sway.

She installed herself in a little Oriental saloon looking into the garden of the Hotel. Very retired, very cool, and laden with the perfume of the flowers, it formed a charming retreat. The light filtered through plaited blinds, and amidst the silence the plashing of a fountain falling into a marble basin lulled one into reverie, and made the hours slip by unheeded.

Stretched upon a Turkish divan, and leaning back against its silken cushions, she waited motionless. She was tracing out a line of conduct. She would, in order to please the Count, be very indulgent. She would only force Séverac to explain the attitude he had adopted. And if he showed himself humble and repentant, she would send him away after having scolded him in friendly fashion, and obliged him to give pledges of submission for the future.

As time passed, little by little a delightful torpor stole over her, and in a vague languor she followed the train of her thoughts. She saw the young man seated before her,

bowing his head beneath her reproaches. She heard him answer her, and all that he said seemed soft and tender. She could not distinguish the words, but the tones of his voice were as caressing as those of a love song. She closed her eyes to prolong the illusion, and she saw Séverac's face bending over her pale and sad.

And she said to herself: "Why this pallor and this sadness? Is it I who am the cause of it? I have, without any motive, cruelly wounded him. But I will force him to forget the insult and pardon me. I will have him smile and be gay."

And stretched upon her downy cushions in the heat of the summer day, she revelled voluptuously in her happy dream, to the accompanying murmur of the falling water. Everything she saw through her closed eyelids seemed rosy.

The sound of the door opening caused her to start up. A waiting-maid entered discreetly. Sarah was suddenly called back to real life. The whole of the vision repassed in an instant before her eyes.

She said to herself. "I am mad. What is the influence that this man has over me?"

"Monsieur Séverac has called," said the waiting-maid. "He wishes to know if madame will receive him."

On hearing the name of the man who occupied her being so despotically, Sarah's heart beat violently, and a thousand confused ideas clashed together in her head. She thought of saying, "Not at home." But she remembered that the Count had told Séverac that she was expecting him.

So, with an effort, she answered: "Show him in."

The waiting-maid retired.

Sarah remained standing, seeking to collect her thoughts. The door reopened, a light step sounded on the floor. Séverac was before her.

Without speaking she looked at him for a moment, slowly nodding her head. Then pointing to a low chair beside her divan, she sank back, nestled in her cushions, and with a charming expression, began softly:

"So I have to send for you. Are we then decidedly enemies?"

"Enemies! Ah! madame," answered Séverac, forcing

a smile, "I am too infinitesimal for you to take the trouble to wish me evil, and I am too devoted to the Count not to entertain the profoundest respect for you."

She waved her hand as though to say: "No, that is not so, and you will not acknowledge the truth."

Séverac, who felt very uncomfortable, remained beside her, not daring to speak, overcome as he was by the penetrating look she fixed on him.

"We never see you," resumed she. "You seem to make a point of keeping at a distance from me."

"I keep my place, that is all," said he softly.

"Are you sworn to solitude then?"

"No, madame, but I work a great deal. I have my way to make, and however kind anyone may be towards me, I am still bound by my endeavours to justify the favour I enjoy."

There was a short silence.

Sarah seemed to reflect. Her brow clouded over, her features contracted.

"Nothing can explain your attitude," she said in a grave tone, "unless you have been told some evil of me, and believe what you have heard."

"I swear to you, madame——" protested Séverac.

"I have been greatly calumniated," continued she. "Life has not been sweet to me. I have had to take society by storm. Everyone repelled me. The servants of my adoptive mother were the first to do so, when I was little, and she took me into her house. They called me the foundling. Then the companions of my childhood, who had heard my story narrated by their parents, and who called me the gypsy to make me cry. And then the family into which I had been brought without their being consulted, also repulsed me, and sought to despoil me, although they were rich and did not need my adoptive mother's heritage. Abandoned to my own resources, I had to defend myself against the fancies of men, the jealousies of women, the stupidity of all. My whole life has been a struggle in which I have been constantly victorious, making myself feared or respected, and giving no one the right to scorn me. You alone are the first who has dared to do so. Why?"

Sarah's cheeks were flushed, and her eyes glittered. She had drawn nearer to Pierre, and, at each movement she made, the soft perfume exhaling from her garments stole towards him, enveloping him in an intoxicating atmosphere.

"You deceive yourself, madame," answered the young man in a trembling voice; "I was only timid, and I am only respectful. When you were unmarried, what good was there in my approaching you? What could I have hoped? I am poor, and my rank in the service is not high. Perhaps I should have loved you, and that would have been a great misfortune for me. Now you are married to a man to whom I am deeply attached, and I must more than ever remain on one side. It is said, and it is easy to believe, that you have inspired a passion in all those who have lived in your intimacy. Therefore, see only an extreme prudence in my keeping at a distance. Laugh at me if you like, but do not blame me, and do not consider my loyalty as a crime."

Sarah remained motionless, looking at Pierre. The young fellow's manly face appeared to her in all its masculine beauty. She still heard him after he had ceased speaking. His firm, frank voice awakened hitherto unknown sensations within her. A sudden burst of tenderness filled her breast. She could not now endure the idea that Pierre should go away, and that she would no longer see him save by chance and at rare intervals.

She was frightened at discovering what a place he whom she thought she hated had taken in her heart. She shuddered at the thought that she might have been loved by him, and that at that moment, instead of being the Count's wife, she might have been Pierre's, and free to adore him. It seemed to her that without him her life would become gloomy and empty. She wanted to attach him to her at any price.

"You are the first who has spoken to me with such frankness," said she. "I am grateful to you for it, and I see the esteem in which you ought to be held. It would therefore be doubly painful to me to lose you now. I offer you fraternal friendship. You will advise me. If I do anything imprudent—I am not incapable of it," she con-

tinued, smiling, "you remember the little stall at the Pandolfini Palace—you shall scold me, and I will receive from you what I would not endure from anyone else."

She held out her beautiful hand.

But Pierre did not take it. He shook his head sadly.

"At the risk of losing your favour for ever," said he, "it is impossible for me to accept the part you offer me. Between a man and a woman of our age friendship is impossible. It is a happy dream which has always a sad awakening. I might willingly yield to the sweetness of this charming tie. Though the sentiments I should feel would at the outset be pure and unmaterial, who knows whether little by little they would not grow corrupted? I might wish to like you only as a friend, and yet not be able to keep myself from loving you as a lover."

Sarah made a sudden movement.

Pierre continued with energy :

"I am ruining myself for ever in your opinion, I know ; you will think me at once very vain and very pedantic. I am ridiculous in thus moralising, I feel it ; but it was necessary to tell you what I have told you in order to explain my conduct. Forgive me, and believe me that I shall ever retain an ineffaceable recollection of the favour you have shown me."

These last words were uttered by Pierre with lively emotion. Sarah, pale and frigid, answered nothing. An impulse of hatred swept over her. A sense of fury strung up all her nerves. Her look darkened, and with compressed lips she uttered these words :

"So be it. Go. Farewell."

Pierre rose in silence, bowed gravely to her, and making a few steps, half stunned and almost staggering, sought to reach the door.

A sob caused him to turn round. Sarah had sunk on to the divan, with her head buried in the cushions. She had forgotten all restraint, and yielding to her grief, crushed by her humiliation, she was weeping bitterly.

Pierre felt ashamed to leave her thus. Compassion overpowered reason, and slowly returning he drew near Sarah. She had not heard him. She was weeping, and

her beautiful hands were clenched in the silk of the cushions. Her golden tresses drawn up high on the top of her head revealed her white neck and the summit of her shoulders. Greatly affected, Pierre seated himself on a low stool beside her and took her hand, moved by the spectacle of this despair, which he felt to be sincere.

"I beg of you," he began softly.

He bent towards her. Sarah had raised her head on hearing him speak. Involuntarily they found themselves face to face, looking into each other's eyes.

Their breaths mingled, their lips met, they rose clasping one another to avoid falling. Pierre felt Sarah's hand clutch his own. Through a mist he saw her face pale with passion. He made a step back to free himself from the grasp that encircled him. He strove to utter a cry, but it was choked back by her soft burning lips seeking his a second time. And clasped in each other's arms they sank down with a long sigh.

Séverac was the first to recover his senses. He drew back quickly from Sarah. She sought to retain him, but he repulsed her, and with heavy head and contracted features he remained motionless, vaguely listening lest anyone should surprise them.

A deep silence reigned around, and in the mysterious half light of the Oriental saloon all things assumed a softer tone. The flowers, stifled by the heat, exhaled more penetrating perfumes in their silver baskets. The ripple of the water falling in the marble basin soothed the ear. All around there was calm, soft repose, forming a horrible contrast with the furious agitation of Pierre's mind and the desperate revolt of his heart.

Sarah had risen, and approaching the young man had placed her hand upon his shoulder.

This gesture of familiar ownership summed up so plainly for Séverac the situation in which he stood towards her, that he made a step backwards, to free himself from this hand which seemed the yoke beneath which he could no longer do aught but bow.

"Pierre," murmured Sarah, with a supplicating movement.

"Leave me," said he, in a hollow voice; "I am a wretch, and I loathe myself."

She sat down close beside him without saying a word; but taking his hand almost by force retained it in her own. She remained motionless at the young man's feet, as though imploring him. He, fierce, threatening, like a wild beast taken in a trap, averted his look and choked back the words on his lips, fearing if he spoke to insult his accomplice by fiercely casting upon her all the responsibility of their sin.

A carriage rolling over the gravel of the courtyard aroused them from their prostration. It was the Count returning. They looked at one another, and struck by the same thought, that they would both have to face the man whom they had wronged, they grew pale.

Sarah read such anguish in Séverac's eyes that she recovered her energy and coolness. She made a reassuring gesture, and passing before him lifted one of the hangings and showed him a door opening into a passage serving for the servants.

In the shadow of this passage they stood motionless for a moment, listening to the beating of their hearts, full of terrible emotions. Should a servant suddenly appear they were lost.

The sound of the Count's steps ascending the main staircase reached them faintly. They heard him say, in his sonorous voice:

"Is madame in?"

The footman answered:

"Madame is in the Turkish saloon with Monsieur Séverac."

"Very good. Here, take these papers to my study. No, stay, I will go there myself."

A door was opened and shut.

Sarah murmured in Séverac's ear: "Go, take the back staircase, and on reaching the ground floor go out by the vestibule."

They exchanged a last look. Sarah, with pleading eyes and a melancholy smile playing about her mouth, approached her face to Pierre's, seeming to beg a kiss. He turned, and with a gesture of despair:

"Farewell," he said, and was gone.

Sarah stifled a sigh, and returning to the Turkish saloon seated herself by the scene of their sin, with burning brow and swollen heart, repeating to herself with intoxication the avowal she would fain have cried aloud to all the world: "I love him. It is he who shall be my master and my god."

The Count, on entering, found her calm and smiling.

"Alone?" said he. "They told me that Séverac was with you."

"Did you not meet him?" answered Sarah quietly. "He has only been gone a moment. You must have passed one another."

"Ah! I went into my study before coming on to find you"

He drew near Sarah, and caressing her tresses with his hand

"I am sure that you have both been very nice to one another, and that the interview passed off very well," said he kindly.

A diabolical light gleamed in Sarah's eyes. A smile that she endeavoured to restrain curled her lip. She remembered that it was the Count who had insisted on her receiving Pierre, that he had exhorted her to be kind towards him at a time when, not yet acknowledging her love, she had striven by her harsh conduct to raise obstacles between the young man and herself. And with the fatalism of her race she thought. "It was to be; it is you who willed it."

"You don't answer me," resumed the Count, uneasy at Sarah's silence; "did you not part good friends?"

"Oh yes!" answered Sarah. And cutting short his interrogations: "But you, have you just come from the Ministry?"

"Yes, dear, I am perfectly sick of it. We are engaged on a pretty piece of work. Under this deuce of a government that calls itself one of equality, patronage is the only thing that has any influence. They want to make us pass over good officers who have seen service in favour of a set of duffers, whose only merit is that they are cousins to Deputies."

"And you submit to that?" asked Sarah, who seemed to be taking an extraordinary interest in her husband's affairs.

"As little as possible. I have not hidden my way of thinking from the Minister. You understand, dear, I don't mince matters with him; he was chief of my staff in 1868 'With your concessions,' I said to him, 'you will end by giving us an army which will be nothing more than an armed mob. They badger you in the Chamber? Very likely. Well, put yourself in a rage, and tell them straight out to hold their noise. They won't move after that.'"

"It must be very wearisome," said Sarah, who had not heard a word of what the Count had been saying to her.

"I have a frightful headache from it. It is only half-past five, and the carriage is below. Will you come for a drive through the Champs Elysées?"

"If you like," answered Sarah; "I will just put on a bonnet and a mantle, and I am ready."

And leaning back in her carriage amidst the string of equipages, and abstractedly returning the bows addressed to her, Sarah had leisure to think of Pierre

CHAPTER X

SÉVERAC had been able to leave the Hotel in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré without attracting attention. A prey to an inexpressible bewilderment, he walked straight on before him, careless of the road he took, looking without seeing, and astonishing the passers-by by his disordered gait.

One sole thought filled his brain, that of the infamy into which he had plunged, led on by a vertigo, the overwhelming effect of which had been beyond his comprehension. "I am the vilest of mankind," he said to himself; "I have forfeited honour, I have inflicted an outrage on a man whom I respect and love. It is impossible for me to live."

And positively resolved to die, he sought by what means he might do so without arousing suspicions in the mind of him whom he wished to avenge, and without adding to the

grief his mother would feel at his decease the shame of a suicide that would be set down to madness. To start for Africa, yes, that was the best plan. The tribes bordering on the frontier of Morocco were in a constant state of revolt, and the detachments which held the positions in the south were daily under fire.

He would find an opportunity of getting killed out there usefully, and not without glory. It was more than he deserved. But how to start after the Count's entreaties to him, and under what pretext? And penetrated with the sense of his fault, imagining that the husband's eyes would readily read his heart, he trembled at the thought of going and asking him for leave again. Would not such a request really enlighten the Count as to the state of affairs? And if, too, in his repentance, he had the right to seek to meet his punishment half way, had he also the right to irredeemably compromise Sarah?

He walked on, turning over these things in his mind, and without noticing it he had passed beyond the Arc de Triomphe, and was following the footpath bordering the main avenue of the Bois de Boulogne. He suddenly halted motionless and as if petrified. In a brougham passing at a trot, and drawn by two chestnut horses, he had just seen Sarah, still wearing the same dress, seated beside the Count, and smiling at him. The General had also seen him, and waved him a friendly sign with his hand. Pierre mechanically raised his hat, and watched the receding carriage as it bore away the husband, tranquil and happy, and the wife serene and impassible.

Thus nothing was changed in the relations of these twain. They were side by side chatting as they drove peaceably along. The sin had not upset their existence, and everything was as on the day before. And the morrow would be calm, happy, and without remorse. He sat down on a bench in deep thought.

Little by little the vehicles grew fewer. The sun was setting behind the heights of Suresnes, reddening the slopes of Mont Valérien with its last rays, and casting gleams through the woodland as if from a fire. Over Paris the sky was deepening into a violet shade, and rare foot pas-

sengers were hurrying through the dusk back towards the Arc de Triomphe. Pierre let his glance stray carelessly around. He was thinking:

“Was it possible that this woman had had the energy necessary to face her husband’s look, and show him a face like that she had worn yesterday? What a strange power she must have over herself; and how redoubtable she must be!”

And the recollection of Sarah leaning back in tears on the divan with the silken cushions in the Oriental saloon recurred to him. He saw her golden hair, her tempting neck, and her shoulders shaken by sobs. Then she was standing upright before him. He beheld her eyes still full of tears, he felt her teeth on his lips in a maddening kiss. And, despite himself, he shuddered, and the sweet perfume of her garments mounted to his head like a subtle poison. He passed his hand across his forehead; he strove to give another current to his thoughts. But the form of the beautiful Englishwoman ever returned paramount, sovereign, and irresistible. He felt a rush of anger. He thought: “Am I then bewitched? Does she already possess me to the point that I can no longer free myself from her? I do not love her, however.”

And pressing his clenched hand to his breast as though he would have crushed his heart, he continued to sit silent and absorbed on the bench, tracing lines with his foot on the gravel of the path.

“Hallo! What are you doing here?” called a cheerful voice.

Pierre raised his eyes. His friend Frossard stood before him, smiling. The young notary had just alighted from a carriage drawn up at the edge of the path. He had been able to draw near Séverac without arousing his attention.

“Are you studying a new system of fortification?” asked Frossard, pointing towards the lines that furrowed the gravel in front of Pierre. “I have just come from the Rue de la Faisanderie, where I have been to draw up a will. I noticed you as I passed. You looked as if you were moon-struck. Have you had any dinner?”

“No,” answered Pierre, rising to his feet, and affecting

great calmness of mind. "I had a bit of a headache, that is all; I came out for some fresh air."

"Do you know it is close on eight? Come with me to Durand's; we will have dinner together. You don't seem up to the mark. Are you in love?"

Pierre shuddered. He feared lest Frossard should have read his thoughts. But the good fellow was not gifted with so much penetration.

"For my part, I am quite upset, old man," continued the young notary; "I am madly in love. I am wasting away through it."

Despite his preoccupation, Séverac could not help glancing at the rounded figure of his companion. He saw his plump, rosy face framed by his auburn whiskers. With his good-humoured look, he did not seem created for great outbursts of the tender passion. He would be a model husband, and would make his wife happy.

"And whom are you in love with?" asked Pierre abstractedly.

"Ah, my dear fellow, with the daughter of a man whom you know, for he is one of the intimate friends of the Count de Canalheilles. A wild boar, a bison, an aurochs, a being fabulously surly, who took an aversion to me from the first moment I spoke to him, and whose daughter I'm in love with to the extent of losing all relish for food or drink. But come and dine, and I will tell you my story at table."

"It must be Colonel Merlot whom you allude to," said Séverac.

"You have hit it. Besides, he is easily recognised. The only one of his species. To be in a good position as regards fortune, to have an office entirely one's own, to be one of the best matches amongst the Parisian middle classes, to have the right to choose and to come in contact with such a father-in-law! But his daughter is an angel. How could such a lamb have sprung from such a bear? Nature has unfathomable mysteries—or rather——. But no. It would be odious to me to cast a doubt on the virtue of my future mother-in-law deceased, otherwise I should believe that the Colonel is not the father of his daughter. Ah! I

am unfortunate, Séverac This extraordinary porcupine, into whose family I wish to enter, will refuse me her hand out of a spirit of contradiction. But I have made up my mind, nothing shall rebuff me. I will submit to all his affronts, and disarm him by my patience. She has a pretty name; she is called Madeleine. Come and dine; I will tell you all about her."

And pushing Séverac into the carriage, Frossard, boiling over with enthusiasm, cried to the driver: "Place de la Madeleine"

The meeting with Frossard was a fortunate thing for Pierre; it tore him away from his heartbreaking thoughts, and forced him to return to everyday life Seated in a private room of the restaurant, he submitted to the perpetual flow of his companion's confidences. He found with surprise that he was hungry. He ate with pleasure; he who a few hours before saw the end of his existence. He was obliged to listen to Frossard and to answer him. The movements of the waiter who came and went with the dishes, walking hastily yet silently, napkin on arm, with bored deference and ceremonious gravity, occupied his attention. Through the window near which they were dining there rose the noise of the Boulevards, and Séverac looked at the heavy three-horse omnibuses getting under way with difficulty, whilst the conductor, with his waybill between his teeth, jerked the bell-spring registering the number of passengers. Street boys were running along the pavement offering bunches of violets to the occupants of the cabs now driving towards the Champs Elysées. Rendered giddy by several glasses of Sauterne that he had drunk unconsciously, Pierre, with his chin resting on his hand, vaguely heard Frossard, and remained motionless, with his whole being benumbed

"Pure and holy love and perfect confidence, that is the true ideal," Frossard was saying in tender tones; "the true ideal. And this happiness is only to be found in marriage. To the deuce with unhealthy passions and dangerous adventures! I am a notary. I want tranquillity, repose, children. Oh! children."

And with his eyes lighted up with ecstasy, Frossard

puffed a mouthful of smoke from a cigar he had just lit towards the ceiling.

"You will marry, too, one of these days," he resumed. "And we shall be excellent company; our wives will visit one another. Madeleine must have some young friends; you shall marry one of them. By Jove, but now I think of it, she is found already—Mademoiselle de Cygne, the General's niece. You are not rich, it is true, but the son of General Séverac may aspire to any woman. And besides, the Count, who is very fond of you——"

He stopped. Séverac had turned ghastly pale. At the allusion to De Canalheilles all the horror of his situation had again seized hold of him. The Count, evoked by Frossard, rose before him threateningly.

"What is the matter with you?" asked the young notary. "Are you ill? You are looking now just as you were when I saw you in the Bois de Boulogne."

"It is frightfully hot here," replied Séverac, rising.

"That's true. Let's be off," said Frossard.

He took his hat, and looked at his watch.

"Whew, it is already half-past ten. How time slips by when one is talking! Are you going home now? Shall I see you to your door? It is on my way."

He took Séverac's arm, and walking slowly through the streets, as if he regretted to lose this priceless confidant, who listened to him without interrupting him, he accompanied him to the Rue des Pyramides. Utterly worn out, Pierre went up to his rooms, got into bed, and fell into a dreamless sleep that lasted, unbroken, till eight o'clock the next morning.

Daylight was flooding his room when he opened his eyes. He was astonished at having enjoyed such tranquillity. He was ignorant that violent emotions produce the same result as crushing fatigue on young people, and that the soul alone has inexhaustible powers of suffering.

On waking, Pierre recovered his energetic resolve of the preceding day. He determined to depart, in order to put an insuperable obstacle between Sarah and himself. He would write a note to the General to tell him that he was obliged to join his mother, who was ill. There in his loved

home, beside that good woman, amidst the peace of the quiet country, he would wait until time had prepared the evolution he wished to bring about.

He packed his portmanteau, and placed the letter for the Count prominently on the mantelpiece, so that his orderly should see it on coming in to tidy the room. It was only ten o'clock. He opened the window, and seated himself in an arm-chair, watching the martins uttering shrill cries as they chased one another.

But in a minute or two he rose; he could not keep in one place. He paced up and down the little room that served him as a study. He felt cramped within these four walls, an inward trepidation moved him, and he had the idea of going at once to the railway station. There he might kill time in breakfasting, and once off he felt certain of recovering his ease of mind. He took his hat and portmanteau, and was preparing to open the door of the ante-room when he heard the bell ring.

The sound re-echoed in his heart. It was the hour at which the General had called the day before. Pierre trembled at the thought of finding himself face to face with the old officer. He took off his hat, placed his portmanteau in a corner, and remained for a few minutes with his feet nailed to the floor, hesitating, asking himself whether he should open the door or remain still and silent, to give the impression that he had gone out. He could hear a foot tapping impatiently on the landing. The bell rang again, and a firm hand struck several blows against the panel of the door as though to hasten the coming of him to whom this summons was addressed.

He made up his mind and opened the door.

He started back. A woman clad in dark attire, her face covered with a thick veil, stood before him. She entered quickly, almost pushing him back into the sitting-room, and then placing one gloved hand on the back of a chair, and restraining, as it were, with the other, the beatings of her heart, she stood still, breathing with evident difficulty.

Pierre, stupefied, gazed at her from a distance, not daring to make a movement. He had at the first glance recognised Sarah. But her presence was so unforeseen that he strove

to doubt it, saying to himself. "'Tis a mirage; she will vanish; it is impossible that this can be she." How could this queen of society, who never went out alone before two in the afternoon, bound as she was by the thousand fetters of her life of luxury, possibly be in his bachelor's rooms at ten in the morning? Irresistibly impelled, he drew near her. She raised her veil, and showed her adorable face, animated by emotion, and with eyes full of fire.

She seated herself in an arm-chair, and leaning her elbow on the arm, looked fixedly at Pierre.

"Madame," exclaimed the young man, full of trouble, for he trembled for her sake, "I beg of you not to add to the imprudence with which you have acted in coming here by remaining a moment longer. Go. If you have aught to say to me, I will call on you in course of the day. I will do whatever you like. But, for mercy's sake, go. Suppose anyone had met you!"

Sarah shook her head slowly

"Fear nothing; under this veil it is impossible to make out my features, and with this mantle a woman's figure cannot be recognised. Besides, I did not meet anyone, and I have taken precautions. My carriage is waiting before the church of Saint-Roch; I passed through the church and came out by a side door. We have therefore some moments to ourselves."

This remark made Séverac shudder. He cast a supplicating glance towards Sarah, and saw her calm and smiling.

"Your place is very nice," said the beautiful English-woman, looking round the room in which they were, without rising.

Her eyes rested on a man's head in a black frame. It was a bronzed countenance with delicate features, but an energetic expression. The blue-grey eyes were very soft.

She remained looking at it for a long time. Then turning to Pierre:

"It is your father, is it not?" she asked in a moved tone.

Tears came to Séverac's eyes. Then he made a despairing gesture, and with convulsed features answered:

"My father, yes; your husband's brother in arms."

Sarah turned pale and rose. Pierre, thinking that he had touched her, resumed, as he approached her in the attitude of a suppliant :

"I implore you to leave. You tell me you do not run any risk ; it may be so. But what you are doing is wrong, and I should be unworthy if I did not tell you so. Go."

"No," said Sarah firmly.

And pointing with a mocking smile to the portmanteau which Pierre had placed in a corner, she added .

"It seems that it was time I came, and that you yourself were getting ready to do the very thing you advise me so eagerly."

She stopped. Her eye caught sight of the letter intended for the Count. With a bound she reached the mantelpiece, read the address, opened the envelope, and began to read. A cloud passed over her face.

"I did not deceive myself," she said bitterly, "when I expected you would take some extreme course. Your mother ill ! A pretext ! You are running away, that is all."

She approached him, and fixing her eyes upon him .

"Well—and I ?" she asked.

Pierre uttered a groan, and then in a voice so stifled as to be scarcely audible, he said

"You ? But you know very well that the situation in which we find ourselves can only have one solution, an eternal separation. We have both been victims of an inexplicable fatality. I still ask myself how ever we could have committed the sin with which we have to reproach ourselves. Ah ! I will mete out stern punishment to myself, you may be sure, for I have a horror of what I have done. But at least I am alone, I have only entangled myself in my sin, and I can form a desperate resolution without striking the innocent. Whilst as for you, your husband is there, good, generous, loyal, and undeserving of suffering. A word imprudently uttered, a look noticed, may reveal this infamy to him. Oh ! anything rather than that ! I love him, I respect him. At the cost of my life I would have spared him a pain, and now I have outraged him so cruelly that the whole of my blood could not wash away the stain upon his honour."

The young man's convulsed face expressed the most cruel anguish. He wrenched his hands furiously in one another in a paroxysm of rage against himself. The physical pain he felt seemed to him to alleviate his mental agony. However, he went on.

"Forget a moment of folly, banish that frightful hour from your remembrance. Put all upon me. Make me in your mind responsible for all that happened, despise me, execrate me; I only desire your anger and your hate. That is all that I deserve. I beg you for it on my knees. Become impassible, calm, and smiling; deceive your husband from a sense of duty as others deceive out of infamy. Live as in the past beside the man who loves you. Assure his tranquillity. Let him never suspect aught, and let his happiness be the redemption of our sin."

Sarah, motionless, had hearkened to Pierre, devouring him all the time with her eyes. Each of his words caused her heart to leap. He was no longer the cold, stern Séverac she had known, and in the very ardour of his humility, and the fever of his sacrifice, he went directly against the end which he sought to attain.

Far from inducing Sarah to sacrifice herself, he only increased the passion that possessed her.

"You beg of me to forget," said she. "What tells you that I shall do so? You ask me to hate you. What tells you that I can? Turn away from you for ever when you have awakened my heart, which I thought incapable of beating? No! do not believe that I can resign myself to that now. God knows that I have done all in my power for a long time to keep you at a distance from me. As if I had guessed what an influence you would have over me, I strove to hold you in aversion. I succeeded in deceiving myself. I fancied that I detested you. Yet it was only love maddened at not being able to find a free vent. Despite myself you occupied my attention. I followed you with looks, I followed you in my thoughts, and I was enraged to see you so indifferent, so cold. Every time that I could find an opportunity of wounding you I seized on it, as you well know. And when such an opportunity did not arise, I tried to invent one. I sought to raise obstacles be-

tween us. But I loved you in spite of all, despite my will, and in each of my acts of malice a revolt of pride was to be traced. Oh! I felt that I really loved you, and I hoped too that you loved me when you threw yourself between me and that insolent Marquis at Rome. What tortures did I not endure when I saw that after your duel you affected not to let me think that it was to protect me that you had risked your life! Then my tenderness assumed the form of hate, and I bore you malice for your disdainful coldness. I felt eager to humiliate your pride. Pierre, I did not wish to see you at home, it was the Count who obliged me to await your visit. Blinded, he thrust us both into the presence of peril. We succumbed. Who could have escaped?"

"Those more upright than ourselves," said Séverac sternly.

And he remained seated gloomily, with bent head and averted eyes, feeling encompassed within a circle which he could not escape from save by upsetting everything around him and causing frightful misfortunes. Sarah was beside him playing with a Corsican stiletto, with an ebony handle ornamented with silver rings, which she had taken from the table. Pierre, in a fit of passion, rose and snatched up the weapon, which she was turning in her hands.

"It would be very easy to finish the matter at a single blow!" he cried, with a wild look.

And he turned the sharp point towards his breast.

Sarah did not make a movement to check him. She approached him, filled with a mad wish to share his fate.

"Very well," she said; "but let it be both of us, then."

Pierre dashed down the stiletto with such force that the blade snapped in the floor.

"Have I no longer the right to be alone, even in death?" he asked with a downcast air.

"No," answered Sarah gravely, "you belong to me, and I love you too much to agree to anything separating us."

A dreamy expression stole over her mobile features.

"But look how inconsequent you are!" she continued. "You beg of me to spare my husband's peace, and you do all you can to trouble it. You rush to extremes with strangely unreasonable vivacity. You first of all think of

going away. What graver motive for suspicion could you give to the Count? And then in an outburst of frenzy you wish to kill yourself. Instead of preaching prudence to me, as you were doing just now, you ought to ask my advice."

"Oh! I see that you are skilful and well advised," said Pierre bitterly, "and that you know how to calculate matters."

"You are trying to wound me, but I can bear anything at your hands," replied Sarah. "Besides, you are right, I strive to calculate in order to ensure your security and my happiness. And if I am skilful and well advised, it is from love for you. Do not be indignant at that. I am not very exacting. Only to see you, to hear your voice, to know that you are not far off, and that I may hope sometimes to find myself face to face with you, that is all I ask. My tenderness will be dumb and my happiness hidden. Is it then so difficult, so criminal? And who will know it?"

"We shall," cried Pierre. "Is your modesty then but an outward show, and are you only ashamed before others? But to blush for oneself, to be ashamed in one's own eyes, to be esteemed by all save oneself, is not that the worst of tortures? Because the sin be well hidden, will it be less excusable? I shall be an unknown thief, that is all, but none the less a thief. You belong to him whose name you bear."

Sarah blushed slightly.

"I bear his name, it is true. But as to being his——"

At these words a ray of light illumined the frightful obscurity amidst which Séverac was struggling. He saw a possible attenuation of his sin.

His face so completely revealed the sudden relief given to his tortured heart, that Sarah, like a skilful general, divining the exact point where the attack should be pushed, already foresaw victory in her grasp.

"Could he expect to find more than a daughter in me?" she added.

"He loved you, however," said Séverac, again seized by his doubts.

"Do not men make many concessions when they are smitten?" she continued coquettishly. "I was rich, free,

happy ; I was no longer a child, I was twenty-six years old. If the Count had not agreed to my wish I could have refused him ”

“ Ah ! why did you marry him ? ” murmured Pierre

Sarah glided close to him, and taking his hand, which she clasped in both her own :

“ Who knows the bottom of a woman’s heart ? ” asked she, with an enigmatical air. “ Perhaps I sought to draw nearer to you.”

Already Pierre had ceased to argue. The charm emanating from Sarah was acting on him irresistibly. Her soft voice had numbed the will of him whom she sought to overcome.

She had been leaning over him, and now she was whispering in his ear, intoxicating him with the soft perfume that emanated from her, inspiring him with her voluptuous ardour, enveloping him in her enchanting grace. And already prompt to yield to the specious arguments she had put forward, Pierre was arranging terms of capitulation with his conscience. Probity was dumb within him, silenced by desire. Sensual love, awakened by the contact of this tempting being, began to inflame his blood and completed the overthrow of his reason

And she, eager to triumph over the resistance she had encountered, displayed all her powers of seduction. She had managed to twine her arms closely around him, and resting her head upon his shoulder, with her golden tresses close to his lips, she murmured in a low voice which thrilled Pierre .

“ Yes, I have always loved you. Before I even knew you I was awaiting your coming, and none could please me. From the first day that I saw you, you took possession of me, despite my wish to resist, and ever since you have occupied my thoughts and filled my heart. I have loved you in my dreams. Ah ! in those you did not resist me ; you were kind. Your eyes had only tender looks, and your lips only kisses. It was an exquisite intoxication. Alas ! on awakening, I found you gloomy and cold. I have suffered ; ah, yes, and you must make me forget it. Those happy dreams, won’t you let them become realities ?

Will you always repulse me? Will you drive me from your arms? Oh! I am so comfortable here, close to your heart. Keep me, I beg of you; do with me what you will as long as I am yours. I adore you. Won't you love me a little?"

And consumed by Sarah's ardent inspiration, his heart-strings gnawed by a furious temptation, bewitched, conquered, Pierre no longer had the strength to answer "No."

From that moment Séverac's life was disturbed by a terrible conflict between his conscience and his passion. Sarah, like some daring lion-tamer, had to struggle with him and bind him quivering to her will. Under her all-powerful eye he ceased to have a being of his own. But when away from her he cursed his weakness. It seemed as if, like the gypsy sorceress from whom she perhaps descended, she had spells to make herself beloved. Had she bewitched Pierre? He was no longer in full possession of his will, and he felt it. Truly possessed by love as by a demon, he examined himself, and failed to recognise himself in the cowardly being whom a woman's glances rendered mad.

And yet he did not love her. He only desired her. Out of her presence he promised himself no longer to submit to her ascendancy, to resist her fancies. But in her presence he lost command over himself. A cloud came over his intellect, and his uncurbed passions made him this woman's slave.

When alone he had terrible fits of depression. He saw Sarah with her audacious smile commanding him to do evil, and in a burst of powerless rage he cursed the temptress. He underwent most horrible torments. He sought to escape from his own company. Others in his situation would have sought refuge in the drunkenness that brings about forgetfulness. He only strove not to find himself alone in face of his own thoughts.

He was no longer recognisable in his way of life. He was no longer the grave Séverac living alone and in retirement. Isolation now frightened him as darkness does children.

He plunged into society. He was to be seen at balls,

remaining very late and dancing furiously. He was seeking to tire himself out. Then, far into the night, he returned home, and was able to sleep without having the hallucination that upset him. He joined a club. This well-behaved and severe young man began to play, but not at baccarat or lansquenet, which leave too much freedom to the imagination. He sought games that exact a severe mental strain and entirely absorb attention. He apparently became enamoured of whist and chess. He might be seen with his elbow resting on the chessboard, slowly thinking out a move. His eyes would become fixed, and his face would pale somewhat. The form of Sarah had suddenly risen before him, and he had forgotten the game, the advance of his men, and the fact of his adversary being patiently waiting for him to move. Then he would utter a stifled exclamation, and resume the game with eagerness.

A singular fact to be noted was that the General was a member of the Union, one of the most important clubs in Paris, and one to which admission is very difficult. Monsieur de Canalheilles, having great influence with the committee, had pledged himself to get Séverac elected a member without difficulty. But the young officer had declined this offer, and had joined the Mirlitons, assigning as a reason that this was a more lively club, composed of younger men, and, at the same time, of equal social status with that of Monsieur de Canalheilles. In reality he sought to shun all intimacy with Sarah's husband. He was consumed with poignant remorse. He never grasped the hand of this upright man without a blush. The connection which was enforced by his position as aide-de-camp was already too painful for him to seek to render it more complex by continual meetings in society.

He also shunned Sarah. The assemblies at which he put in an appearance were by preference those which she did not attend. Whenever the Countess de Canalheilles arrived at a ball where Séverac found himself, he became dull and preoccupied. He took refuge in the more remote rooms, and willingly seated himself at a card-table. But Sarah would send some obliging gentleman to hunt him up, and imperiously compel Pierre to dance.

Pompéran, inexhaustibly lively, had noticed the little assiduity Pierre showed towards "his superior officer," as the dandy familiarly styled the Countess, and jested with him about it. Tripping along with a tune on his lips, he would come up to Séverac in the interval between a couple of dances, and, smacking him on the shoulder, would say, in a bantering tone.

"Come, Captain, your superior officer has arrived, it is your turn for duty, my friend. Waltz, in quick time, march."

And, pleased with his jest, he would hum to the tune of "Lischen and Fritzchen "

" Oh ! I am a soldier,
Quite ready to do
Whatever my leader
May order me to
Tra la, tra la la "

And on Séverac paying no attention, and remaining, as it were, nailed to the spot.

"Come, Captain, the Countess is flirting her fan impatiently. Quick march, my dear fellow, or you will be put under arrest. You know, without joking, she told me to go and find you. That's one result of waltzing with a perfection that is every day becoming more rare. You are a victim to your personal advantages, my friend. Too great a talent ! Ah ! by the way, you will sup at our table, eh ? We'll have some fun ! "

Séverac would then rise slowly, and, gliding across the floor through the groups, careful to avoid treading on the trains of the ball dresses, he would make his way towards Sarah, trembling already, and with his heart oppressed at the sight of her sitting waiting, with her white arms and charming shoulders displayed. She would speak to him for a moment in a low voice, then, rising with languid grace, would yield her supple figure to the young man's arm, and, in a voluptuous transport, they would whirl away in a waltz, clasped one to the other, she with her eyes half closed, a vague smile playing on her lips, giddy with the motion, and almost swooning in the arms of him she adored.

During the whole of that winter Sarah shone with all the

dazzling splendour of perfect happiness. Flattered and sought after by the most brilliant men and those least accustomed to be resisted, she met them all with a coldness more stimulating to them than the most artful coquetry. She would not give Pierre the slightest cause for jealousy. She plainly felt that he would escape her at the first occasion that offered itself to him to break his chain. She kept herself for him alone. And married to an old man, beautiful, courted, she offered the world the spectacle of apparently unassailable virtue.

The Count, feeling quite young again, enjoyed her triumphs with delight. He had all the honours of them; he was envied, and, like the favourite of a queen, he had his courtiers. He was pampered up for Sarah's sake. There were repulsed lovers who fancied they might render themselves welcome to the wife by fawning on the husband. A brilliant wit, and born for an existence of pleasure, the Count, who had suffered so much from isolation after the disasters of the last war, yielded to this whirlwind which bore him along the primrose path. His self-esteem was delightfully flattered by Sarah's grace and beauty. And yet his sense of security was absolute. The more she was surrounded and courted, the more she accentuated the attractive severity of her bearing. The Count was looked upon as very fortunate. Merlot would often say, with a growl:

"I don't know how it is, but that beggar is going to be adored all his life. When he was young they all ran after him, and now he is old he is still cock of the walk."

While the Count, with a smile, observed to the Colonel:

"You see it is because I am not always bristling up and grumbling like you that I am welcome everywhere. If I were in your place, I would, if it were for only once, chance to be amiable, in order to enjoy the surprise of my friends."

But Merlot, nodding his head with an air of suspicion, would murmur:

"All very well, but let us see the end of it."

And with a bitterness natural to him, he sought to prove to his friend that it was not possible that a man of his age

could be really loved by a woman as young and as charming as Sarah.

One day, when, in presence of Séverac, the Colonel was indulging in his favourite pastime of making unpleasant remarks to the General on the subject of his insolent good luck, Monsieur de Canalheilles observed :

“I have, however, one regret—not having a child.”

“Be easy,” chuckled Merlot, “husbands always have them at your age.”

“Yes,” answered the Count calmly, “but if I had any I should certainly be sure that they were my own.”

Séverac turned pale. A horrible light broke upon his mind. Until that day he had answered the reproaches of his conscience by the supreme argument with which Sarah had so cleverly supplied him ; that she was only the Count's wife in name. He looked upon himself as a kind of Almaguerra carrying off Rosina from Bartolo, and only guilty of one of love's peccadilloes. It was thus that he strove to reassure himself in his moments of painful uneasiness, and this imaginary attenuation of his guilt had helped him to endure life such as Sarah had made it for him.

In a moment all these illusions vanished. A word from the Count sufficed to enlighten him. On hearing him speak thus assuredly of possible paternity, Pierre discovered Sarah's criminal deceit. He understood that she had imposed upon him, and he was overcome with a sense of profound disgust. He pictured this adorable creature beside her aged husband, murmuring the same tender words, and lavishing upon him the same caresses. And so on quitting the arms of the one she passed into those of the other. And with a calm smile upon her lips, and perfect calmness on her brow, she carried out her twofold deception, lying to her lover as well as to her husband.

Was it possible that she could carry perversity to such a pitch ? And suddenly the recollection recurred to him of Sarah passing by in her carriage within a few hours of her fall, leaning against her husband, calm and cool as the most upright of women, and bowing as quietly to the man who had a little before clasped her to his heart as if he were a mere chance comer. It was always the

same audacity. And from the first moment she had acted a part.

Gloomy wrath was stirred within him. He forgot his own treachery in his indignation at that of Sarah. She was certainly of gypsy blood. She had all the duplicity and all the impudence of her race, rendered still more dangerous by the seductive varnish under which education had hidden them. Although apparently as strictly correct as a lady, she in reality possessed the cynical shamelessness of a gypsy. The absolute sense of security on the part of the Count inspired Pierre with sincere pity and filled him with deep shame. He became more gloomy and more nervous, and for a whole week he found means to avoid Sarah. He saw her at a distance. But in vain she signed to him to come and speak to her by imperatively raising her fan. He put on a face of marble, whilst his eyes lost all expression. The symptoms of the violent state of agitation into which this attitude on his part threw Sarah did not escape him. He did nothing to calm her. He thought it perfectly just that she should fret and suffer. Her tortures were some compensation for his own. Thus amidst the cruel embarrassments of his situation Séverac gradually lost his natural goodness and uprightness of character. He became bad tempered.

Spring had returned, and Sarah, exasperated, did not wish to remain in Paris. She took a fancy to go to Canalheilles, where she felt sure of having Pierre at her will and pleasure. In the intimacy of country life he could not escape her. If he took refuge with his mother at Bois-le-Roi nothing would be easier for Sarah than to hunt him up there. It was a charming walk on foot through the forest.

The Count, although slightly astonished at his wife's sudden love for the Chateau de Canalheilles, where up to that time she had always seemed to be terribly bored, lent himself to her new caprice with his wonted good nature. Besides, the Countess did not seem to intend to pass a cloistered existence there. With somewhat feverish gaiety she had declared that she would have a succession of relays of visitors in order to impart to the old manor-house sufficient animation to remove its resemblance to a State prison.

At the outset the Pompérans installed themselves there, sufficing alone to fill the long stone corridors with songs and laughter. Then came Mrs Smarden, a charming American, whose husband was earning millions at Chicago whilst she was cutting a dash in Paris. From the garrison at Fontainebleau a swarm of young officers came over each evening, enlivening the vast saloons with the brilliancy of their uniforms. And the piano, touched by the nervous fingers of Lieut. La Liviniere, made the lofty ceiling, beneath which the Countess de Chateaubriant had perhaps danced the pavane, re-echo with the lively notes of waltzes and quadrilles. But Séverac remained invisible. He had obtained leave of absence from the General, and did not set his foot at Canalheilles.

Sarah had to put a good face on it, and swallow her anger in silence. Not only was Pierre absent, but the Count, lacking occupation, never left her. Worshipping the society of women, in which he had been brought up and had always lived, he remained in the drawing-room, busying himself over trifles, chatting with desperate persistency when Sarah would have fain been alone to think of Séverac.

The General had to make a tour of inspection in the provinces. He talked a great deal about it. It was an unpleasant task to him. The prospect of living in country inns and being constantly on the road rendered him sulky. He only became gay and happy again in the evening after dinner, when he saw the light dresses of the ladies whirling about the drawing-room as they danced. This joyous noise, this captivating bustle, pleased him. As his little cousin Pompéran said, somewhat irreverently, he pricked up his ears like a pensioner who hears the band of a passing regiment.

Séverac was to accompany the General on his tour, and for three weeks he would therefore enjoy full liberty. He had come to look upon this journey away from Sarah as a deliverance, even though he must accompany a man whose hand he could not clasp without shuddering. Between Sarah and the Count he did not hesitate. With the husband he experienced a painful sense of restraint, but with the wife he underwent the most frightful torture.

Sarah, secretly exasperated, displayed an extraordinary animation and flow of spirits. But her nervous gaiety sounded hollow, and in her eyes there flashed at times certain gleams of light which old Mrs Stewart knew so well and which foreshadowed some violent crisis, as the will-o'-the-wisps flickering above the reeds at the edge of a marsh foretell the coming storm.

CHAPTER XI

AN entirely unexpected event suddenly changed the face of matters.

One morning the Count, contrary to his habit, came into his wife's dressing-room. He held a letter in his hand, and seemed radiant. Sarah, much astonished, signed to her waiting-maid to retire, and twisting her magnificent hair into a knot, looked with curiosity towards her husband.

"Read this, dear," said he, holding out the letter.

Sarah cast her eye over the paper. It was not Séverac's writing, so her face assumed an expression of indifference. From the moment the letter was not from Pierre, what could it matter to her? She let her fair tresses, which reached almost to her knees, roll on to her shoulders again, and began to comb them in an abstracted fashion with a silver comb.

"It is not worth while my reading it," she said to the Count; "tell me what it is about."

"It is this, dear. Blanche, my niece, has made up her mind to leave the convent, and asks me if I will have her with me. What a question! Uneasiness at the thought of her taking the veil was the only cloud over my life. Now with her and you both beside me, I shall be perfectly happy. For you will welcome her, will you not, with as much eagerness as myself?"

Whilst the Count was speaking, Sarah had reflected. The advantages that the presence of the young girl would secure her struck her forcibly. The Count, with his natural mobility of character, would be taken with Blanche,

and for some time would occupy himself with her exclusively. To bring the young girl home, a journey as far as Paris, at anyrate, would be necessary. She would accompany the Count, and would find means to slip away for an hour to Séverac's. She would compel him to come to Canalheilles, and, thanks to the diversion caused by the young girl's presence, they would have a little liberty.

"You cannot doubt the pleasure that I shall feel at receiving your niece," she answered, showing herself as gracious as she had been sullen a moment before. "Your home is hers. It is I who am an intruder. But I will make her forget it, you may be sure, by my affection."

"You cause me great joy," said the Count tenderly, "and I do not know how to thank you for all the happiness you give me. I am really privileged, and I can understand that I am envied."

He had taken Sarah's hands, and was kissing them softly. An ardent blush spread over the young woman's face. Her husband's touching confidence troubled her. She looked back with some bitterness. Carried away by an irresistible passion, she had forgotten everything. But in presence of the old man's effusion, on hearing him thus address her thanks which were so undeserved, she was seized with a sense of shame.

"You must not give Mademoiselle de Cygne time to reflect," she said, recalling her husband's attention to the subject of their conversation. "I think it would be a good thing for you to go and fetch her this very day. The new life your niece will lead will necessitate a great deal of shopping. She has only her conventual outfit. And perhaps she will not dislike being guided in her purchases."

"You meet all my wishes half way," exclaimed the Count, "and you will be this child's——"

"Mother," said Sarah, showing the joy she felt at seeing her plan succeed so completely.

"A very young mother," said the Count, with gallantry. "Ah! I must tell you that I have also had a line from Séverac. Where have I put it?"

And fortunately the Count was hunting in his jacket

pockets, for Sarah became as white as the lawn of her dressing-gown.

"Well, what does he say?" she could not resist asking, whilst her blood flowed so hotly through her veins that it seemed to her that she was wrapped in flames.

"He announces his arrival at Bois-le-Roi, where he means to finish the preparation of an important task with which I have entrusted him."

Sarah, so alert and animated at the idea of going to Paris, where she thought to find Pierre, became gloomy and depressed at her hope being frustrated. She cursed the haste with which she had undertaken to accompany her husband. The Count being absent for a whole day, she would have been free to go to Bois-le-Roi. But now she would have to keep her engagement.

She thought with bitterness of the disappointments she had continually to submit to. She reckoned up her hours of happiness as against her days of grief. The sum of the one was far below that of the other. Such rare and fleeting joys bought at the price of so much suffering and uneasiness! It was what she had chosen, what she still desired. But was it not madness? She saw around her people perfectly happy. The young Pompérans, with their arms always twined about one another, always kissing like turtle doves in spring—they had neither cares nor worries. But what silly frivolity in this joyful existence! What insipid monotony in this constant affection! All was on the surface, nothing below. Had their hearts ever beaten? Had they ever once felt the devouring sensations that bound Sarah so strongly to Pierre! And in a burst of passion she cried to herself: "Rather a single hour of such love than a whole existence of their mild affection. Yes, to fill the soul with supreme intoxication, and then to live that hour over again in thought till eternal repose comes."

But mistress of herself, she was able to hide her agitation, and to present a smiling, placid countenance to her guests.

That evening Mademoiselle de Cygne was installed in a wing of the Chateau near the library. It had been her mother's room before her marriage. A little staircase led from the library to the greenhouses, and had formerly

allowed Mademoiselle de Canailleilles to go downstairs without passing through the main apartments.

On finding herself in this room, which had been kept in the same state as when her mother occupied it, Blanche experienced deep emotion. All the little objects that had been used by the parent, whose memory was so dear to the girl's heart, were in their places. In the drawer of a charming Louis Seize table, which she had the curiosity to open, she found an unfinished piece of embroidery. Doubtless, her mother had been working at it at the time of her marriage, and had left it uncompleted in the room of her girlhood. A tear rolling slowly down Blanche's cheek fell upon the embroidery.

She pressed the canvas, yellow with time, and still fastened to the oilcloth, to her lips, and then carefully locked up this relic. In the alcove at the head of the bed was an ivory crucifix. Blanche knelt down, and took possession of the room by a prayer.

The arrival of Mademoiselle de Cygne amidst the brisk gaiety of the inmates of the Chateau caused neither trouble nor awkwardness. Blanche, from the first moment, was charming with her slightly astonished gravity. She felt bound to put all these smiling faces at ease. She had cleverly learnt their favourite amusements from her uncle, and after dinner, seeing them keeping their seats in the drawing-room with a little restraint, she said softly.

"Is there not to be any dancing this evening?"

And when they protested, declaring that it was perfectly possible to pass the evening in some other fashion.

"I should be vexed to be the cause of any change in your pleasant customs," replied she. "Besides, I can make myself useful."

And seating herself at the piano, she played the opening bars of a lively waltz.

Exclamations broke out from all sides of the room, and the couples rapidly forming, began to whirl round under the eye of the Count, who, lazily leaning back in an arm-chair, gazed at the little feet skimming over the floor, whilst the sparkling notes of the waltz floated through the open windows into the night.

Blanche slept badly. The deep silence of the country troubled her. All her habits of life were suddenly changed. The light step of the sister-superintendent pacing along the corridors, lantern in hand, the dull rumbling of the omnibuses over the paving stones, making the glass of water at her bedside vibrate on its tray, the stifled murmur of her companions softly whispering together; all these familiar sounds that used to lull her to slumber were missing. She turned about feverishly in her bed, and not being able to find repose she thought of reading. On her table she had noticed a book bound in blue morocco, and stamped with her mother's initials. Having relit her candle, she took up the volume, and read on the title page "Eugénie Grandet."

From the very first lines she was under the influence of a charm. The singular analogy between the character of the vine-grower drawn by Balzac, and that of the Marquis de Cygne struck her forcibly. She pictured to herself her mother living in the dull and gloomy Hotel of the Rue de Bellechasse in *tête-à-tête* with the harsh and mania-possessed collector. She saw her pale and timid like the wife of the miser Grandet. The arrival of Charles Grandet, and Eugénie's chaste fresh love for her cousin, transported her. She was obliged to make an effort to force herself to leave off reading. And in the obscurity of her room the characters of the romance presented themselves to her imagination under a more definite shape. Eugénie was herself, and Charles Grandet wore the features of the tall young man in black whom she had seen weeping in the cemetery near her father's tomb. She knew, through her friend Madeleine, that Pierre Séverac, like Charles Grandet, had lost his father under tragical circumstances. She consoled him in thought, and little by little began to love him. She was vexed at giving way to such ideas. She tried to think of something else, but she continued to see Charles Grandet wearing the features of Pierre Séverac. She imagined the two lovers exchanging their vows in the garden of the miser's house. And it was herself and Pierre who were seated hand in hand beneath the flowery canopy of creepers.

She ended by falling asleep at two o'clock in the morning, and at half-past six she was suddenly awakened by the confused notion that she had not heard the dressing bell and was late. Her eyes as they opened fell on the bright-coloured hangings of her room, into which the sunshine was streaming. She smiled at her mistake. She was now free, and her own mistress. There was no longer any bell to serve as a signal for work or rest for her. She could see from her bed through the opening in the curtains the green clumps of trees in the park. Not a sound could be heard in the Chateau, not a movement announced that its inmates were astir. The regular grating of a rake on the gravel of the walk beneath her window was the only noise.

The day spread itself out before her in its prolonged vacancy. What was she to do? How could she occupy her time? And how would she accommodate her laborious activity to the idleness of the worldlings surrounding her? She only knew of their style of existence by hearsay; but she instinctively felt uneasy. Accustomed not to stay in bed when once she had opened her eyes, she sprang up, slipped on a morning-gown, and opened her window. The sun, already high in the heavens, lit up the flower-beds and made the dewdrop sparkle on the lawns. A trellis-work, over which a pear-tree stretched its knotty branches, covered the whole wall of the pavilion in which Blanche was lodged. The pure morning air caused the young girl to feel a sudden sense of intoxication, the solitude of the gardens tempted her, and wishing to enjoy this charming morning, she at once completed her toilet.

It was eight o'clock when she went downstairs. For the first time she had cast off her convent boarder's uniform, and dressed in a gown of unbleached cambric trimmed with lace, and holding a large red silk parasol in her hand, she experienced no little pleasure in walking beside the ornamental water. Her image was reflected in this clear mirror, and she felt astonished at seeing it. She no longer recognised herself in this elegant young lady with a gracefully looped-up skirt. She sat down on a bench, and there in the blaze of the sunshine she remained dreaming, lost in the

solitude of the large garden, bathed in the soothing air, and fully enjoying existence.

The opening of a little door in the park wall adjoining the main gates roused her from her torpor. She rose in order not to be surprised, and remained motionless on seeing Séverac enter, followed by his mare, who, with the reins on her neck, walked behind him, rubbing her intelligent head against her master's shoulder.

Pierre and Blanche were within ten paces of each other. They looked at one another for a moment, she blushing and he astonished. Slightly alarmed by the red parasol, the mare pricked her ears and made a couple of bounds sideways, which brought her quite close to the young girl.

Séverac was at her head in a moment.

"Don't be alarmed, mademoiselle," said he. "She is a little frisky, but not bad tempered."

And with his whip he threatened his mount, who shook her head and neighed softly.

Blanche drew near and patted her satin-skinned neck.

"Excuse me, mademoiselle," said Pierre, "for popping in like this. I thought the General would be the only one up at this hour."

Whilst speaking he had fastened his horse to a ring fixed in the wall. Hat in hand, he turned his steps towards the Chateau in company with Mademoiselle de Cygne. They walked side by side without speaking, both feeling very uneasy; she thinking of what she had read the night before, he stealing glances at the young girl and admiring the modest grace of her figure.

"Ah, ah! pet; so you are doing the honours of the house this morning!" said the General gaily, appearing at the top of the garden steps. "Good-morning, Pierre. My dear child, let me introduce Captain Séverac to you."

Then turning to Pierre:

"Mademoiselle de Cygne, my niece."

Pierre bowed low. The words uttered by Frossard, on the evening when the young notary had made him his confidant, in the private room of a restaurant, recurred to his memory.

"You will marry too yourself one of these days," Fros-

sard had said ; “ Madeleine must have some young friends. Yes, by Jove ! but I remember ; Mademoiselle de Cygne, the General’s niece. You are not rich, it is true, but the son of General Séverac may aspire to any woman.”

He again heard Frossard’s voice, though it was a year ago, and he let his eyes rest on Blanche. She was leaning, slender and charming, on her uncle’s arm. She was rather pale, having lived a secluded life from childhood, and the contrast between her and Sarah was striking. The woman with the golden hair, strong and ardent, with flashing eyes and tempting lips, awakened the idea of a mad passion. The young girl, with her fair tresses, delicate and timid, with her dreamy eyes and calm mouth, would make one dream of a celestial and eternal love.

But Pierre said to himself, sadly, that between the young girl and himself there was a far more insurmountable obstacle than the difference of fortune, for was not Sarah there, exacting, imperious, easily irritated, and ready to commit any folly ?

The cannon ball that she had riveted to Séverac’s ankle was already very heavy to drag. What efforts would not the young man be obliged to make to recover his liberty ? He experienced hours of discouragement, during which he saw himself chained without any possible hope of deliverance. Marry ? He who could not even absent himself for a few weeks without laying himself open to the most violent reproaches. And yet she was there before his eyes, the young girl whom his friend had thought of for him. Everything about her was adorable. She was the incarnation of purity.

Séverac pictured her in the little garden at Bois-le-Roi, beside his mother. How the dear old lady would have loved her ! She had already often said to her son :

“ When am I to be a grandmother ? I am old now. Your father’s loss has made a great void in my life. Fill it up with grandchildren.”

But this was a dream impossible to realise. Sarah was there to forbid him such tranquil happiness.

He walked on slowly, lost in these reflections, following the Count and his niece, and listening vaguely to their conversation.

"I say, Séverac, have you already had breakfast?" asked the General, looking at his watch. "It is half-past eight. Let us go into the dining-room. What do you take in the morning, dear? At the convent you are perfect cats. Chocolate, eh? With milk? Well, you shall see some milk. It's from my Breton cows. Merlot says that it costs me twenty francs the quart. That's a little exaggerated. But it is exceptional."

That day, contrary to all her previsions, Sarah did not have to make any effort to induce Séverac to remain at the Chateau. After working with the Count, he returned to the terrace and passed the day in sauntering, chatting and playing lawn-tennis. It was only at five o'clock that he took his leave, wishing to return to Bois-le-Roi so that his mother should not have to dine alone. He went home at a foot pace, carelessly following the forest path, really guided by his mare, who closely skirted the undergrowth, cropping green shoots from the bushes as she passed.

At table, seated in front of Madame Séverac, he spoke but little, for he was reflecting over the events of the day, already alarmed at the impression made on him by Mademoiselle de Cygne, and asking himself with anguish whether he was going to fall in love with her. What madness it would be, he thought, as he smoked his cigar in the little garden along the box-edged walks, to fall in love with this young girl! He would be wilfully meeting unhappiness half way. He had not the right to love. He was bound by the sin he had committed, and must remain faithful to his accomplice. His whole life was pledged, he was well aware. Reason ordered him to turn away from Mademoiselle de Cygne, and probity, not to risk troubling her heart. He formed the resolution of only remaining at Canalheilles during the time needful for the discharge of his duties and of avoiding every opportunity of meeting Blanche.

For some days he kept his word. He arrived in the morning, went straight to the General's study, and as soon as work was over started for Bois-le-Roi. But chance undertook to upset his plans, and almost every time that he crossed the courtyard he encountered the young girl at the

edge of the marble fountain. She was seated, holding a book in her hand. To reach the stables Pierre was obliged to pass her, and affecting an air of indifference and hastening his steps he bowed to her without raising his eyes.

Perhaps, if less mistrustful of himself he had continued to pass his days at Canalheilles, the feelings he entertained towards Blanche would have turned to those of pure and simple friendship. But by keeping away he began to think a great deal about her, and by a roundabout, yet none the less direct road, the young girl took possession of him. Without being aware of it, he was already in love with her. He applauded his firmness, praised himself for his reserve, and did not perceive that each effort he made to withdraw himself from the influence of *Mademoiselle de Cygne* strengthened the secret power which she had over him.

He could not, however, avoid dining sometimes at Canalheilles. Colonel Merlot and his daughter had arrived there. And Frossard, whom the Countess had invited in the hope that Séverac would be attracted by his friend, loudly claimed Pierre's aid. Never had the old soldier, so remarkable for the evenness of his ill-temper, behaved more execrably. Since he had been obliged to take Madeleine from the convent he had not left off growling. It was with delight that he witnessed the young notary's arrival, and he began to torture him with the ingenuity of a Red Indian. Thanks to the diversion afforded him by Frossard, Madeleine was able to obtain a little breathing time. This charming girl submitted with exquisite meekness to the Colonel's atrabilious temper, humoured his despotism, and smilingly accepted the zealous surveillance he exercised over her.

Frossard, resolved to endure anything from the father of her whom he loved, displayed the patience of an angel. He let himself be bitterly chaffed by the Colonel, and kept on the gloves though his opponent was hitting bare-handed.

Pierre therefore resigned himself to visiting the Chateau, but showed himself so sad that even the Count became uneasy. Sadness was in his eyes the worst of illnesses, and he would have preferred breaking a leg to becoming morose. He questioned the young fellow, but could not

get anything out of him. To all his inquiries Séverac answered that there was nothing the matter with him, and that he was the same as usual. One evening when they were speaking of the young man's melancholy, and seeking its cause, Blanche let fall these words—

“But are we not near the 14th of August?”

“Well, but,” exclaimed the General heedlessly, “what has the 14th of August to do with Pierre's sadness——?”

He did not finish his sentence, and flushed scarlet. The recollection of the battle of Borny came back to him gloomy and painful. He again saw the march upon Verdun, under the escort of his brigade of cavalry, whilst far in the rear roared the furious cannonade of General Séverac's forces engaged with Marshal Steinmetz. They halted from time to time. And leaning against the side of his carriage the Emperor, impassible but very pale, listened to the din of battle, silently twisting his long waxed moustache. Then they started again, following the main road, through villages, across plains, skirting forests, with the vague sensation that they were being pursued, and that the Uhlans were already galloping on either flank of the escort and watching the Imperial party.

“It is true,” said the Count, “and alone amongst us the child has remembered this mournful anniversary. But who has rendered you so well informed about Séverac?” he asked, without any idea of chaff.

Blanche remained silent; her eyes seemed to implore the help of Madeleine, who exclaimed briskly:

“It was I, General, who have often heard the details of the last campaign from my father, and who retold them to Blanche.”

“That's it!” chimed in Merlot; “all French children, girls and boys, ought to learn to read in the official despatches. If Heaven had granted my prayers by sending me a son I should have made a thorough soldier of him.”

But if the General was satisfied with the explanation given by Madeleine, Sarah, less easy to throw off the scent, had not suffered one of the sensations undergone by Blanche to escape her. The Countess trembled at the thought of having discovered the true reason of Séverac's sadness in

the emotion concealed with such difficulty by the young girl. It was since Blanche's arrival at the house that Pierre so obstinately kept away. She again cast a penetrating glance towards Mademoiselle de Cygne, and beheld her outwardly calm, bending over her embroidery with an indifferent air. But the slight quiver of her eyelids betrayed her uneasiness.

"She is thinking of him," Sarah said to herself. "Does she already love him?"

Her heart swelled to suffocation, the blood flew to her face, and her hands turned cold. She rose abruptly. It seemed to her that she would be stifled in the drawing-room. She went out on to the terrace and began to walk up and down.

The night breeze cooled her brow. She felt calmer, and was able to reason. Fettered in the bonds of her guilty love, she had never faced the possibility of a separation between Pierre and herself. Too well accustomed to triumph, she had not thought that he might cease to love her. Up to now she had made use of all her energy, all her ability to create occasions of seeing Séverac. She felt herself capable of anything in order to retain him. She went at a bound farther than she had ever gone before.

"His life belongs to me," she thought. "It is he that is my real husband. I shall be free some day, and I shall marry him."

She coolly reckoned up the difference of age between the Count and herself. Forty years. Did not the future belong to Pierre? But if Pierre were to fall in love with another woman? She knew that the despotic power she wielded over him was not solidly established. She had seized upon her lover, she held him beneath her yoke, but it was not without a struggle. For some weeks past Pierre had opposed a secret resistance to her wishes. And then there was this sadness that overshadowed him everywhere, beside Blanche as well as beside herself. She decided to question him, and to force him to reveal his secret thoughts.

Meanwhile she continued to watch. Many circumstances that till then had escaped her, appeared trifling when taken individually, but formidable when grouped together. Thus

every time that Séverac made his appearance in the drawing-room he seated himself near the group formed by Madeleine and Blanche. It was Mademoiselle Merlot that he talked to, but Blanche that he looked at. Often on a fine evening, whilst the others were dancing in the drawing-room, these three remained on the terrace silent, and watching the trail of the shooting stars in the clear sky. Séverac was the only one of the visitors to the Chateau in whom Merlot had confidence. The Colonel had a singular weakness for this grave young man, so unlike all those who surrounded him. And when the Countess, irritated at the length of one of these confabulations, remarked to Madeleine's terrible father :

"Where is your daughter, Colonel? It seems to me that you are leaving her to herself this evening."

"No," the Colonel would answer quietly, "she is with Mademoiselle de Cygne and Séverac on the terrace."

Sarah had no other resource than to invite Frossard to stay at Canalheilles. The presence of the Colonel's detestation altered the state of things; for the young notary, after walking from group to group, chatting in an idle fashion, would regularly seize the moment when he saw the Colonel deep in whist, to join his friend and the two young girls. Then the Countess only had to say to Merlot, "Where is your daughter?"

The Colonel would bound like a tiger at the thought that Frossard was, to use his own phrase, "sparking." He would leave the game and rush off in the direction of the young people. On their perceiving him there ensued a general flight, and like a covey of partridges above which a hawk is hovering threateningly, they would scatter at once in all directions.

One day the Count, an excellent horseman, wished his niece to learn riding. He looked for an animal quiet enough for the young girl to run no danger. But all the horses in his stable were spirited and hard to hold. He expressed his annoyance at being obliged to apply to the horse-dealers, men in whom his confidence was very limited.

"Those rascals of dealers," said he, "sell you an animal that seems as gentle as a lamb. For a fortnight all goes

well, and then it has a freak and throws you. I should like a nice little mare—well broken, and not up to any tricks.”

The next day Séverac sent the General the mare he was so fond of, and who used to follow him, rubbing her head against his shoulder. He was attached to her, however, and had been offered large sums for the beast without agreeing to part with her. But it was enough that the General had said a word for him to place her at Mademoiselle de Cygne's service.

Blanche had taken a fancy to a very pretty setter bitch called Fane, belonging to her uncle, and used by him in the shooting season. The young girl let Fane run loose, and she never went out without her. Séverac felt an especial pleasure in stroking the intelligent head of this pretty creature. And as soon as she saw Pierre, Fane would dart off towards him and sweep round him in circles, barking joyously the while.

Thus, in all circumstances of daily life the interest felt by Pierre in Mademoiselle de Cygne betrayed itself.

For he no longer resisted. It was all over, he was no more master of his heart. Everything had drawn him towards Blanche, and the more he had said that it was unreasonable for him to attach himself to her, the more he had allowed himself to worship her. Everything about her charmed him. Her chaste grace, her modest bearing, her grave tones, were seductions he could not resist. She had taken possession of him. And it was in vain that he had said to himself that he had no hope; love had been too strong.

He no longer dared to approach Sarah. In presence of the innocent and pure young girl, he trembled to speak to the passion-swayed and ardent woman. He dreaded lest a look of Sarah's should betray them, lest a word should be overheard. He blushed, he was ashamed, he would rather have died than have learned that his horrible secret was known to Mademoiselle de Cygne. The position of things had become intolerable to him. He had never suffered so much from his infamy as since Blanche's arrival. It seemed to him that the young girl's clear glance would read every-

thing. And when Sarah drew near him the perspiration started in agony from his brow.

However, a joyful life went on at the Chateau. The guests arrived every Saturday in batches, and on the great staircase there was a coming and going of busy servants, and of boxes hoisted up with difficulty, amid the opening and shutting of doors on all sides, and exclamations of pleasure.

"Ah! my room is next to yours. We can smoke a cigar together before going to bed."

"And your wife, where have they put her?"

"Right at the other side."

"Ah! they are full of delicate attentions in this house."

"Well, my dear fellow, if one can't have a little quietness in the country, why——"

Every evening a large party sat down to dinner—the ladies in low-neck dresses, the men in white neckties and dress coats. And they danced till two in the morning. The Countess had unearthed some musicians at Fontainebleau. And in the large drawing-room there was a whirl of dresses revealing little feet, and of trains covered with flowers. The "Boston dip" reigned supreme by the authority of fashion.

In the afternoon, about two o'clock, horses were put to the great yellow and black drag, and off they went, the gentlemen on horseback and the ladies on the top of the drag, gracefully grouped in their varied toilets like a basket of flowers. A servant carried a long nickel-plated post-horn, and woke the echoes of the forest with its melancholy notes. The horses on hearing this grew restive, and shook their bits white with foam. These were delightful drives in the smiling sunlight, along verdant roads bordered with heather in full bloom, and through coppices studded with masses of moss-covered rock.

They would stop at Franchard and drink pale ale and eat cherry tarts brought in the boot of the drag. Little Madame de Pompéran asked her husband to swing her, uttering cries of terror when he sent her too high, and feeling suffocated by the rapidity of the descent which made the ribbons on her dress flap and flutter. Meanwhile

Blanche and Madeleine walked about, conversing with the mysterious fluency of young girls who have always something to whisper in each other's ears.

As to Merlot, holding Frossard by a button of his coat, so as to be certain his victim would not escape him, he repeated for the twentieth time in a strident voice a story that caused the unfortunate young man positive torture.

"Yes, sir, it was in 1853, I was then a captain; I was heir to one of my sisters who had resided in the department of the Lot. I was scandalously robbed by the notary entrusted with the inventory."

"Ah! Colonel, the circumstance is deplorable, but fortunately very rare"

"Robbed!—yes, sir, robbed by your fellow-notary."

And darting fiery glances, and shaking his little hawk-like head, the Colonel seemed to be accusing Frossard himself of having deprived him of his inheritance.

"Confound it, Colonel," said Pompéran, always ready to tease Merlot, "in 1853 Frossard was only ten years old. Reasonably he cannot be looked upon as an accomplice of your criminal-minded notary. I know that he is now thirty, and that he is a fellow who pays a great deal of attention to young ladies. But that is not a reason to pronounce him deserving of the galleys."

Merlot uttered a howl like a wounded hyæna, and shouted,

"Young ladies? If I thought——"

"Believe, Colonel," stammered Frossard, "in the assurance of the respect with which——"

"Very fine, very fine. I have my eyes about me. Right face, march."

And leaving Pompéran laughing like a madman, and Frossard thunderstruck, the Colonel marched off, to stand sentry over Blanche and Madeleine.

Towards four o'clock they started off again at a sharp trot, and returned to Canalheilles. They all went up into their rooms to dress. They dined, and after coffee and a cigarette on the terrace, the orchestra tuned up and dancing began. This was the everyday life.

There was a solemnity, however, for which important

preparations were made. Saint Bernard's Day fell on the 12th August that year. It was resolved to celebrate the Count's fête with great ceremony. There were twenty guests at the Chateau, and all acquaintances within a circuit of ten leagues round were invited. Merlot was charged to summon the local band of Bois-le-Roi to serenade the General. Pompéran sent to Paris for fireworks, which were secretly arranged. The greenhouses were pillaged. The Count, round whom all this movement was taking place, soon guessed what it was all about, and he was begged not to appear to have any notion of the surprises that were being got ready for him.

"Be easy," said he, laughing, "I know nothing at all about it. Make your preparations. When the time comes I will be utterly astonished."

He had only begged Séverac not to fail to be present.

"You are becoming very shy again, my dear lad. These are periodical fits you have. Remember that just a year ago you would not be sociable. You must make an effort over yourself. Besides, you must be here on the 12th, to wish me many happy returns of the day. I will also make you a little present."

Séverac had been greatly puzzled by these words of the General. What present did he mean to make him? He had shown himself so good towards him already. What new thing could he have found to favour him with? And it was this excellent man, this devoted protector, this veritable father whom he was deceiving so vilely!

CHAPTER XII

THE Count rose early on the morning of the 12th, in order to inspect the works that were in progress to do him honour. He was anxious that everything should be successful, since Sarah attached great importance to this fête. Followed by Merlot and Pompéran, he gave some advice to the workmen occupied in fixing the framework for the fireworks. He took care that the boats which,

decked with flags and Chinese lanterns, were to float on the piece of ornamental water with musicians on board, were well ballasted, foreseeing that from repeated libations the instrumentalists were not very likely to have much to boast of in the way of sea-legs. He gave a look at the tent set up in the park and intended as a ballroom for the country folk. He looked after the merry-go-rounds provided for the boys and girls; and at eleven o'clock, having settled the minutest details of the fête that was to be offered to him, he came in declaring that he had forgotten all he had seen, and that he was quite ready to be amazed at everything.

The gates were thrown open at five o'clock, and the crowd began to take possession of the park. Under the trees the open-air orchestra gave forth its squeaking note, and the sound of heavy shoes treading on the hard ground, the outbursts of mirth of the lookers-on, and the cries of the dancers were wafted as far as the Chateau. Soldiers from the garrison of Melun were dancing with the pretty village girls. Night was coming on, and from the terrace the Count's guests gazed on all this joyful movement, and enjoyed the exquisite coolness of a charming summer evening. The most important of the company were assembled in the drawing-room, the General commanding the military school at Fontainebleau, the Prefect from Melun, and the Mayor of Bois-le-Roi, a rich button-maker. Sarah, in a bewitching toilet of very pale pink, without a single jewel, and with her magnificent tresses gathered into a knot on the top of her head, was chatting with the Curé of Bois-le-Roi, a venerable old man, who had been seized as a hostage by the Germans during the war, after a skirmish, in which the Mobiles had killed some thirty Brunswick hussars. Séverac, in his dark uniform, relieved by the gold aiguillettes of a staff officer, had taken refuge at the farther end of the little drawing-room. Seated near a window, he lent an indifferent ear to the cries of the crowd.

Upon the piece of water which reflected the many-hued lights from the lanterns, the gaily decked boats passed to and fro, attracting the great carp, who thought it must be

daylight, to the surface. This vast domain, thus illumined, resembled a scene from fairyland, and as though reanimated by the splendour of the fête, the ancestors seemed to smile from out their gilded frames.

"Ah! where the deuce is Séverac?" asked the General, escaping with difficulty from the circle formed round him by the municipal authorities.

"I saw him just now in a quiet corner, General," said Frossard, whom Merlot had just put to flight. "Yes, there he is."

The General advanced towards his aide-de-camp with open arms and a radiant face. Pierre had abruptly risen, and watched his approach with deep uneasiness.

"Now that I have done with all the people complimenting me, it is our turn, my dear lad," said the Count. "The Minister, doing justice to your merits, and taking your brilliant services into consideration, has, at my request, made you a Major."

At these words Pierre became so pale that Frossard, thinking he was about to fall, advanced to support him. He remained standing, however, his eyes blinking, his hands hanging inertly by his side, without saying a word, as though thunderstruck.

"Hang it all, old fellow," said Frossard, "you are overwhelmed, but there is a reason for it. The bullion epaulette at thirty years of age! There is not a single officer of your rank in your branch of the service who is not greatly your senior in years."

"My dear Frossard," said the General, with emotion, "Pierre is a capital soldier, and, besides, his name is Séverac. No one in the army will ever forget how his father died."

Pierre shook his head sadly, and two tears fell on the sleeve of his uniform. He suffered frightfully. To be so culpable towards the man who thus overwhelmed him with his kindness, to be so unworthy of the illustrious departed, whose memory was thus honoured before him, to be so favoured, and to deserve it so little! He wished he had it in his power to lay down his life for the General, and to wash away the injury he had done him with his blood.

"Come, my dear lad, what has been given you was your due. Alas! it cannot restore you your father, who certainly would have done a great deal for you; but at any rate you see you have not been forgotten. Oh, by the way, there is another side to the picture; you will have to leave us."

At these words the colour returned to Séverac's cheeks; it seemed to him that he had emerged from the tomb, and that new blood was flowing through his veins. He breathed again.

"You cannot remain with me with your new rank, and, besides, in a few months, I pass into the reserve list. We must part, and that is the cloud on the horizon. But I am not an egotist, and have only had your advantage in view. Besides, we will settle all that for the best."

"General," said Séverac eagerly, "since you reckon my career before all other considerations, let me say that after such a great favour as that which has been conferred on me, the only acceptable post would be one where I should have a chance of seeing active service. A year ago I wished to go to Algeria. You dissuaded me then. Well, now I ask you again, from the bottom of my heart. Let me——"

He did not proceed. Sarah, pale and frowning, had just made her appearance. Halting behind the curtain at the entrance of the room, she had not lost a single word that had been uttered. She had heard the Count tell Pierre that they must separate. She had heard Pierre ask to go to Algeria, and, smitten to the heart, she came in, prepared to defend her threatened happiness.

"My dear," said the Count gleefully, "you can offer your congratulations to Séverac, his promotion will appear in to-morrow's *Journal Officiel*."

Sarah smiled feebly, and said, in a stifled voice——

"I congratulate you, sir, and very sincerely."

"Oh! he is a young dog who has nothing to complain of," said the General, without noticing his wife's uneasiness; "he will be a General early. He will act up to the responsibility of his name."

And as Merlot came, looking for Frossard, whom he had lost sight of for a quarter of an hour, and whom he

feared might be making a flank march in order to rejoin the young ladies, the General said to him :

"Do you know, Séverac is a Major. There's a bit of news to please you."

Merlot started as though someone had trodden on his corns. He grew purple, his ears swelled out with the rush of blood to his head and appeared as though going to burst, the tuft on his lower lip bristled, and he muttered between his teeth :

"Greatly pleased—very much indeed—good promotion. Jupiter ! these fellows have luck nowadays ! In my time it took ten years to get a step."

Then feeling the need of venting his ill-humour on Frossard, he turned to him :

"But one can't do too much for good officers. Séverac is an earnest fellow and not a butterfly, a rattle-brain like some young men of my acquaintance. Do you hear, young six-and-eightpence ? And I am delighted at his promotion ; yes, I am delighted !" he exclaimed, with furious emphasis.

"But I as well, Colonel, believe me," answered Frossard.

The Colonel turned his back on his pet aversion, and walked away in company with the Count, followed at a respectful distance by the love-smitten Leopold.

Left alone with Séverac, Sarah slipped her arm into that of the young officer. They took a few steps, and passing through a French window on to the terrace, they went and leant against the marble balustrade. On this side of the Chateau the darkness was profound and the solitude absolute. Only a few rustic lovers seeking silence and mystery were walking slowly in the darkness, with arms entwined, softly whispering, and oblivious of all passing around them. From afar off the joyous cries of the crowd, the last detonations of the fireworks, and the music of the ball now in full swing, arrived in confused gusts. A pale ray of moonlight filtering through the trees of the park feebly lit up Pierre and Sarah. They stood beside one another, motionless and silent, having too much to say, and anxiously seeking words to begin an interview upon which their future might depend.

Sarah, too full of resentment to be capable of restraining herself, spoke first.

"You are going away?" she said, with trembling lips.

Séverac gazed at her sadly, the emotion of the unhappy woman causing him a very painful impression; but he answered in a firm tone:

"It must be so."

"Why?"

"Because this life is unbearable to me," cried the young man, with a burst of anguish; "because each proof of affection that I receive from your husband is the cruellest and most deserved of humiliations to me. Because I am ashamed of myself, and of you; because I despise myself, and am ready to hate you!"

"Pierre!"

"Yes, the existence that I am leading is the most degraded that there could be, and I do not believe that there could be a more painful one. Besides, justly enough, it carries its own punishment with it. And he whom we have outraged has avenged himself so well, that I ask myself how he could do so any further. I have lived under his eyes, robbing him in a cowardly fashion of his own, for you deceived me in telling me that you were not his. You are his wife in reality as well as in name. I have had to receive his confidences. You see that no bitterness has been spared me. I have set at naught his friendship, which is so great that if I were accused of the crime we have committed he would hesitate to believe me guilty, even with the proofs before his eyes. In a word, he is the man whom I love and esteem most in the world, and I am betraying and dishonouring him."

Sarah, deadly pale, her eyes bordered with black rings, her lips tightly pressed together, drew in a violent breath, as though she were suffocating.

"So be it. Quit him," she said, with a calmness acquired by strength of will. "But why go away to a distance? Why go to Algeria? - At least let me have the satisfaction of seeing you sometimes, if it be only from a distance. Let me have the pleasure of meeting you—of speaking to you."

"Sweet satisfaction! great pleasure!" exclaimed Pierre

sternly. "We are face to face with one another like two criminals. Between us there is ever a shadow that threatens us, a remembrance to make us blush, a thought that poisons our kisses."

Sarah was on the point of crying out :

"If you hold our love in horror, it is because you no longer love me, because you love another !"

A vision of Blanche, pure, sweet, and triumphant, rose before her, and she shuddered. She felt a burning, choking sensation in her throat. But she was silent. She was afraid that Pierre in his rage might boldly answer :

"Yes, I do love another !"

After such an avowal all would be over, and she would have to give up all hope of regaining the heart now on the point of escaping her. She seized her lover's arm, and clasping it tightly, with her eyes fixed on his, and her forehead within reach of his lips, she said :

"But I—I worship you, and I beg you for mercy. Have pity on me, if you are so hard towards yourself. You know very well that since the day I became yours, you have been my sole thought, my only dream, my dearest joy. My whole life is wrapped up in you. I am incapable of loving any other man than you. I gave myself without reserve and without hesitation. I have been guilty, I am unworthy, and I would still be so, for to me there is nothing preferable to my love. And I am ready to risk everything to continue this happiness. You make me suffer ; it is wrong of you. You may be sure that when I no longer have reason to believe that you still love me, when my last illusion has vanished, my life will end, and my last breath and my last hope will quit me together."

Pierre was deeply moved. He felt that Sarah was sincere. He gauged the extent of the unhappy woman's passion. She had committed that sin, not from libertinage, but from love. She had been led away by an irresistible power, and had fallen in his arms. He saw her so tortured that he could not help pitying her, and he took her hand and clasped it in his own. He sought to inspire her with courage to accomplish the sacrifice. But Sarah mistook this sign of pity ; she thought she had touched the heart of him

whom she wished to keep near her. A smile passed across her face and caused her tear-dimmed eyes to sparkle.

"Oh! Pierre! stay, I beg of you," she said, clasping him in her arms with feverish ardour. "I will love you so that I will cause you to forget everything."

Séverac became gloomy again in a moment. Sarah's words had recalled him to the real state of things.

"If you love me," he said, "do not ask me to sacrifice the remnant of my honour to you, but help me, on the contrary, to rehabilitate myself in my own eyes."

Sarah fixed her beautiful blue eyes on those of Séverac, and gazed into them as though she sought to fathom the depths of her lover's soul. She read therein an implacable resolve. Then with a flash of inspiration, she tried to attach him to her by the frail tie of gratitude.

"Is it all over then?" she moaned. "Must I accustom myself to no longer hear your loved voice?"

As she spoke the tears ran down her cheeks.

"But at least, if I agree to endure with firmness the frightful grief of your absence, will you think kindly of me for my courage? Will you see in this a supreme proof of love, the greatest that a woman's heart can give?"

She burst into a fit of sobbing. Séverac, pale and trembling, caught her lest she should fall. She gave way like a child, leaning her head on Pierre's shoulder and letting her tears have free vent. He said naught, but thought sadly of the misfortunes of life. If she had become his wife she would have been happy. What had such a favourable fate depended upon? Very little. Upon a little less touchy stiffness on his part, perhaps on a little less fanciful frivolity and ill-regulated coquetry on hers. But matters had taken their course, and it was impossible to live their lives over again. And besides, was it not his fate to love Blanche? Was it not towards her that all his thoughts now turned? And the resolve he had formed to break the bonds of his guilty attachment, had it not been inspired far more by the shame he had felt when the young girl's candid eyes rested upon him, than by the revolt of his tortured conscience?

"I will not leave you the right of thinking that I am

sacrificing your safety and your repose to my happiness," said Sarah, wiping away her tears. "Go, then; I consent."

Pierre could not restrain a movement of joy that cruelly hurt Sarah.

"But swear," she went on, "that you will not forget me when far away."

"How could I forget you?" answered Séverac.

She held out her arms, he clasped her to his breast, and pressed upon her forehead the most impassioned and sweetest kiss that he had ever bestowed upon her

Steps could now be heard in the little drawing-room, the French window of which was open.

"I am afraid they will be looking for us," said Pierre. "Be reasonable; let us separate."

"Yes, you can always retain your reason," answered Sarah, with some bitterness.

And with a harrowing glance, she added: "Farewell, then."

Without looking back she passed along the terrace, gliding through the night like a phantom, and bearing away with her all Séverac's torments and inquietude.

The next day but one after the fête the guests at Canaille were assembled in the drawing-room after breakfast. The heat outside was overpowering, but thanks to the half-closed shutters, a delicious coolness pervaded the large and lofty room. Merlot had taken a newspaper and was reading it attentively, his glasses on his nose, and his lips moving in silence, as though he was pronouncing each word to himself. Suddenly he gave a bound in his chair, and holding out the paper to the Count, who was chatting with Mrs Smarden:

"There is a rising in Algeria!" he cried, in a voice that rang out like a trumpet.

Sarah sprang up as if she had been sitting on a brasier. Blanche did not stir, but she became rather paler, and her work slipped from her hands and fell on the floor. There was a general movement amongst those present, and exclamations broke out on all sides.

"It is Si Sliman, who is at his old tricks again," said the General, after reading. "The latest telegram announces

massacres in the south of Oran. Till we send an expedition into the territory of Morocco to bring those rascals of the Oasis of Figuig to reason we shall have no peace in Algeria. I know the scoundrels. I have had something to do with them. And you have too, Merlot. They make war as a commercial undertaking. When they are too hard up amongst themselves they prepare an expedition and fall on the colonists, whom they pillage and massacre. They carry the plunder they have picked up across the frontier, and then one may whistle for it. The military authorities send out flying columns to camp in the desert, and the poor devils of soldiers die off under arms of privations and misery, watching for Arabs who are seldom seen within gunshot."

"And that is where poor Séverac is going!" said Pompéran, snapping his fingers like castanets. "Whew! the prospect is not pleasant."

"It is war," roared Merlot. "It is there that our great Generals acquired their renown; it is there that Bugeaud, the Duc d'Aumale, Changarnier, Pélissier, Canrobert distinguished themselves. Ah! Isly; ah! Mouzaia. Oh! De Canalheilles, do you remember, eh?"

"Tell me, soldier, tell me, do you recall?" hummed Pompéran, somewhat irreverently.

"Would it not yet be time to prevent his going?" asked the Countess in the midst of the silence that followed.

"Can you think of such a thing, my dear?" exclaimed the General in astonishment. "If Séverac were here he would be greatly hurt at such a question. He comes of too good a stock not to be overjoyed at the notion of taking part in a campaign. If he had not had the idea of asking to go to Algeria before the rising, he would have done so now, you may be sure. I have seen him under fire, I know what he is; he is of the same stock as his father—coolness and dash at the same time."

"Yes, yes," said Merlot, "and if he does not get his brains knocked out he will make his way."

"As a Palisse would have remarked," murmured Pompéran in the ear of his wife, who could not restrain a burst of laughter, which caused general astonishment.

"Besides, Séverac has a fine chance; he is attached to

the staff of General Brillant, who commands in Oran, and who will probably conduct the expedition. He will have the advantage of seeing actual warfare, instead of twiddling his thumbs in some garrison."

"And how long do these campaigns generally last?" asked the Countess.

"One can only make war in that terrible country in the autumn and the winter," answered the General. "In six months at the most it will be at an end, if it is to end. For when these Arab insurrections once begin, you never know where they will lead you to. There are some which are permanent. But do not pity our friend, my dear, he will follow in our track; we have all passed along that road and we are not dead."

"No, it is the others who are dead," said Merlot, with the grim air of a man who has put an end to a number of his fellow-creatures.

"Yes, but then you are made of iron, Colonel. I am certain that you went off to battle——"

"As to a feast Yes, my dear fellow. Ah! there are still some of those fellows in the Atlas who bear my marks."

"Which proves that all did not succumb. Will you come and have a game at bowls, Colonel?"

And Pompéran led off Merlot, whom he liked to lure into relating his deeds of love and war, egging on the old soldier and getting him to impart confidences which he would repeat, embellished with amusing details.

The General's statements, looked upon as much more serious than those of Merlot, who was naturally inclined to brag, had touched Sarah and Blanche deeply. The young girl trembled at the thought of the perils that Séverac was about to incur. The woman experienced a momentary terror. But her love inspired her with absolute confidence in the future. Beloved as he was by her, nothing could happen to Pierre. She did not believe for a single moment that she might never see him again. Indeed, the following night she dreamt that he returned to her for ever, and superstitious to excess, she believed in the omen. She said to herself that Pierre in Algeria, amidst the vast

solitude of the desert, was more surely hers than in Paris, exposed to the temptations of pleasure, an object of feminine coquetry, and above all, free to see and speak with Blanche. In her jealousy she reckoned the sufferings, the dangers he was going to face, as naught. She only counted on the result that she hoped to obtain. At a distance her love for Pierre would appear less culpable to him, her passion would purify itself. She would write to him. And in his isolation, far from all his family, how precious these letters would seem to him. She would thus hold him closely attached to her, and when he returned she would find him more submissive to her sway than ever. It was, after all, but a space of time to be passed. And they were both so young that they could afford to wait. And besides, who could tell what might happen during his absence? The idea that had already occurred to her returned faintly, for she dared not fathom it. If she were to become a widow? And banishing this thought, which seemed to her hateful and criminal, but which she could not, however, entirely stifle, she foresaw within herself a smiling future.

For a week Séverac did not come to Canalheilles. He had written that he was making the preparations for his departure, and that he should devote the last hours of his stay in France to his mother.

Secluded in her company at Bois-le-Roi, he endeavoured to reassure the poor old lady. But her experience had been a sad one. She had seen her husband depart one day, as she was about to see her son depart, and he had never recrossed the threshold of their home.

Her son did not leave her to herself, but hid his own melancholy from her, and spoke of his return, although in the bottom of his heart he hoped never to come back. He soothed his mother's fears to rest, showing her a calm face, and lavishing words of hope on her.

He greatly dreaded the farewell visit he must pay to Canalheilles. He feared an outbreak on the part of Sarah, not suspecting her carefully-planned resignation, and he mistrusted himself in the event of Blanche addressing a word of encouragement or regret to him. But he could

not, however, avoid going to take leave of the General. It would be necessary for the last time to play the farce of devotion and respect towards his old commander.

He left Bois-le-Roi on foot after dinner, following the familiar forest path. He lingered to look at each charming spot as though to fix them all indelibly upon his memory. It was nearly nine when he reached the gates of the Chateau. All the guests were gathered on the terrace expecting him. The night was warm; the flower-beds, heated during the day by the burning August sun, exhaled exquisite perfumes. A feeling of tenderness melted the heart of Séverac, who felt tears come into his eyes.

He seated himself by the Count, listening, without hearing, to the final recommendations which the latter was giving him. Sarah did not take her eyes off them. She reflected that she was about to be separated from Pierre, and that a year at least would elapse before she should see him again. A mad rage, the awakening of her savage nature, took possession of her. A rush of blood flowed to her head, and for a moment she bordered on madness. She felt tempted to rise, to seize her lover, to clasp him lightly to her breast and cry :

“He belongs to me ! If he goes I will follow him.”

She made an effort to rise, but her trembling legs refused to obey her. A cold perspiration bedewed her forehead and made her shudder, despite the warmth of the summer night. Her teeth had clenched so tightly that she could not open her mouth. At last, however, by a great effort she passed her hand across her face and recovered some of her self-possession. She heard Merlot saying to Pierre :

“Look out for fever and dysentery. Never leave off your flannel waistband, and be sure to take some diascordium and quinine with you. You must not reckon on the military medicine-chest; there is never anything in the bottles but jujubes and camomile flowers.”

She thought to herself. “If he is ill I will go and nurse him. No power in the world shall hinder me from going to save his life.”

Then a return of her passing madness again disturbed her. Why should she not start after him the next day?

She would overtake him at Marseilles, and induce him to go to America, India, no matter where, where they would be free to love without restraint. With her large fortune they could live the life of princes.

She looked at Séverac, grave and severe in his dark patrol jacket. What, he follow her? He desert? No, he would never agree to that. They were to be parted without mercy.

Sarah uttered a low cry that rang mournfully in the ears of those about her. They looked at her. But she remained motionless, with her face in the shade, seemingly listening. Suddenly she drew herself up with a look of horror on her face. Pierre had risen to take leave. So she would not even have the chance of a whispered word of farewell.

He approached her, and bowing, said, with emotion :

“Adieu, madame.”

But seeing her ready to faint, rendered uneasy by the whiteness of her lips and the look of bewilderment in her eyes :

“Or rather, till we meet again,” added he, forcing a smile, “for I reckon on coming back. But whatever happens, be sure that your remembrance will always be present to my thoughts, and that in evil days it will restore my courage.”

Two tears sprang from Sarah’s eyes. She wished to reply, but could not utter a word. She offered to Pierre a hand like ice, which he clasped with terror in his own.

“Come, come, my dear,” said the General affectionately, to his wife, “you will upset the lad.”

“Ah! I am like Sarah,” exclaimed little Madame de Pompéran. “I cannot bear a leave-taking, it is so pitiful.”

They all drew round Séverac. Blanche, with her brow contracted, but perfectly mistress of herself, did not betray a single one of the feelings she experienced. She came forward the last, and showing the young man with calm assurance a little reliquary that glittered between her fingers :

“Here, sir,” she said, with her face lit up by a charming smile, “is a talisman. It comes from the Holy Land, and has been blessed. Wear it always; it will preserve you for the friends whom you leave here behind you.”

Pierre bent forward as though he would have knelt, and in a single look he proffered the young girl all the admiration that filled his heart.

Sarah paled on seeing Blanche offer the young officer this souvenir.

"She has thought of giving him a palpable proof of her affection," she said to herself angrily. "But what does it matter? He carries my whole being away with him."

"At what time do you start to-morrow from Bois-le-Roi?" asked Madeleine with feigned indifference.

"At seven o'clock; the train goes at half-past," said Séverac, feeling quite dizzy.

"Good luck, my dear fellow," said Pompéran. "You'll write to us, eh?"

The Count took Pierre by the arm. Merlot fell in beside them, and the young officer walked away. It seemed to Sarah that her heart went with him. She held on to her chair to avoid falling, and fearing she might be impelled to some manifestation of despair that would compromise her, she took refuge in her room. There, stretched upon her bed, her head buried in the pillows, she was able to scream and weep, without any need to veil her grief. It was not till dawn that, exhausted with fatigue and consumed by fever, she fell into a heavy slumber full of agitation and anguish.

A little after seven o'clock in the morning the old cabriolet of the innkeeper of Bois-le-Roi quitted the forest by the road skirting the sunk fence of the park of Canalheilles. Seated by the driver, Séverac was lost in gloomy thoughts. The white mass of the Chateau appearing through the trees roused him from his reverie. He leant forward to catch sight of the flower-garden where he had passed such pleasant hours watching Blanche walking with Madeleine. The paths were deserted. A pale ray of sunlight piercing the morning mist lit up the stone façade. The young man's eyes filled with tears, and a lump formed in his throat.

Suddenly, with an ineffable shock, he thought he saw through the trees a white figure in the avenue running parallel with the road. At the same moment a joyful bark struck his ear. Fane, the pretty black-and-tan, bitch was

running along by the sunk fence and had recognised her friend. Behind her came Mademoiselle de Cygne and Madeleine. The vehicle was rolling along swiftly. They waved their hands as a token of farewell and remained standing, following it with their glances. It seemed to Séverac that Blanche lifted her handkerchief to her eyes. He wished to spring out, to call to them; but a turn in the road shut out the charming view, and trembling and in a state of confusion, he only saw the track extending straight before him and leaving happiness far in his rear.

CHAPTER XIII

It was four o'clock in the afternoon. The burning sun of September had begun to sink to the westward in a sky of implacable serenity. A light breath of air scarcely stirred the jagged foliage of the palm trees. Oran, which since the morning had seemed a city of the dead, was slowly shaking off the torpor off its siesta. Low murmurs like those of swarming bees ascended from the port towards the hills covered with white houses. Moored off Mers-el-Kebir in a sapphire sea, a despatch boat with the tricoloured flag at its peak poured from its funnel a trail of black smoke that floated heavily across the still water. The Arab porters stretched along the parapet of the quays slept on stubbornly, despite the appeals made by the bell of a Spanish felucca in a hurry to take on board a cargo of oranges.

Alone in the streets transformed into furnaces, a dapper foot-soldier was walking briskly along, carefully taking advantage of the strip of shadow cast by the crumbling garden walls. Halting before a square pavilion of European construction, the windows of which were closed by white Venetian blinds, he paused a short time, and with respectful discretion rang the bell. At the same moment a window opened on the first floor, and, a hand having raised the Venetian blind, Séverac's head appeared, bronzed and energetic looking. The little infantryman raised his hand

to his forage cap whilst his two heels shot together and his whole figure assumed an automatic rigidity.

"What is it, Bruno?" asked Séverac.

"A letter, Major," answered the little infantryman, "that has just come for you."

And fumbling in the leather bag he carried strapped across his shoulder, he added, "It has come from Algiers by the coastguard boat."

Pierre took the letter, said "Thanks," with a friendly look, and the Venetian blind fell with a clatter. The soldier faced about and retreated.

In his cool darkened room Pierre glanced hastily at the handwriting of the address. He murmured, "It is not from my mother"; and becoming suddenly thoughtful, took several steps up and down, twisting the envelope between his fingers without opening it, his fixed look seeming to be following some vision. In a moment his thoughts had carried him across the sea. It was no longer the greyish-green vegetation of Africa, powdered with fine sand by the wind from the desert, that he had before his eyes; it was the reddening foliage of the oaks at the end of September, the thick grass interspersed with tall flowering hemlocks, the dazzling surface of sheets of water reflecting the sky of France. And with beating heart he vaguely saw a white dress, trailing the first fallen leaves after it with a low rustle, pass down a shady avenue beneath the scented vault of lime boughs. He was about to follow, respectful, behind, not daring to approach, when suddenly he saw it disappear at a turning.

The half-hour striking recalled him to himself. He breathed a sigh, passed his hand across his eyes as though to finally banish the cherished vision, and seating himself on a divan, the rumpled cushions of which still bore the trace of his slumbers, opened the envelope. At the head of the printed sheet within it appeared the words "Ministry of War," and in an official hand followed an order from the Minister recalling him to France without any explanation. Pierre read it twice with attention, as though he could not believe his eyes. He rose and began to walk backwards and forwards, meditating deeply. Why this recall? Was it a

veiled dismissal? Coming direct from the Minister's cabinet, that is to say passing over the heads of his chiefs and emanating from the head authority? And under what pretext? He did not deserve any blame? On the contrary, he perhaps merited a favour, having been seriously wounded three months before in an encounter with the Ouled-Sidi-Cheick tribe. But his wound was quite healed, and he had not asked for anything. What did this mysterious order signify? Perhaps they wanted to get him back to France for some serious motive, without giving him any explanation, in order not to render him uneasy during the long journey from Algeria. His mother, to whom his thoughts had flown on first receiving the letter, was ill, perhaps in danger.

At this idea Pierre turned pale, a violent agitation seized him, a frightful idea disturbed his mind. In a moment he saw the little house at Bois-le-Roi; the garden was gay, the carefully-weeded gravel of the walks testified to daily care, a bright sun shot its rays through the tall trees, and the birds pursued each other chattering amongst the branches. But the house was silent. And in the room on the first floor, near the bed, under the sheets of which one could trace the outline of a straight and rigid form, candles were burning in broad daylight with funeral solemnity, and lighting up the pale and motionless features of his mother.

Pierre experienced so painful a sensation that tears sprang to his eyes. He murmured aloud, "No, no; it is impossible. She has not died like that, far away from me."

But his heart, terribly oppressed, seemed to rise in his throat. Full of anguish he glanced around him. The first object that caught his eye was a large ivory crucifix which hung at the head of his bed, the tortured arms of the figure of the Saviour extended despairingly. He saw in this a crushing omen. And in the darkness of the chamber the soldier, accustomed to solitude and danger, felt afraid. He walked to the window, opened it, pulled up the blind, and the room was suddenly flooded with light. The light restored Pierre to himself. He breathed more freely. He reasoned with and blamed himself for his weakness; really a woman could not have been more nervous nor have given

a greater proof of her imagination. First the happy mirage in which he had seen the white figure, which, walking beneath the shade of the trees, seemed to be awaiting him; then the horrible nightmare, showing him the fixed and motionless features of his mother, who had not awaited his return to die.

Pierre leant his elbows on the window-sill. The sun was sinking behind the hills, its slanting ray glittering on the gilded pinnacles of the mosques. The streets, deserted an hour before, were beginning to fill with passers-by. The Arabs strolled past with measured steps draped in their burnouses with singular dignity. The donkey-drivers were hurrying out into the country, stimulating the pace of their beasts with blows from their sticks, accompanied by shrill cries. And in a Moorish coffee-house facing Séverac's residence the thrumming of a guzla accompanying a singer was violently interrupted from time to time by the sounds of a quarrel. The coolness of the evening caused the heated soil to emit warm exhalations, which rose in odorous puffs. And as though broken by the emotion he had just undergone, his brain vacant, his eyes wandering, Pierre remained weighed down by a torpor that had seized on his whole being.

His thoughts were of the country he had quitted more than a year back, and which he had narrowly missed never seeing again. It was a very near thing that he had not remained stretched in the grey dust of a caravan route near the oasis of Sfizifa with a Moorish bullet in his breast. He had still before his eyes the furious charge of the native contingent chasing the Arab who after firing at him had sprung up from behind the rock that had concealed him. He heard the fierce cries of his soldiers cheering each other on in the hunt. Then a volley broke from behind a rise in the ground, three or four horsemen fell from the saddles, and amidst the cracking of pistols and the flashing of sabres a flight of white burnouses scattered amongst the trees of the oasis.

He had been brought back on the back of a mule to Daya. There in the cool deep vault of a marabout's tomb, sacrilegiously opened to receive the wounded, stretched as at the

bottom of a casemate on the slab covering the saint's bones, he had lain consumed by fever for six weeks. How often he had said to himself that he should never quit this tomb, and that all they would have to do to bury him would be to raise one of the slabs on which were graven sentences in Arabic. It was then that his weakened mind, in which ideas floated vaguely, had been freely haunted by the vision of the young girl in the white dress. Her sweet face smiled upon him with its tender eyes and pitying lips. He wished to love then, and all his efforts tended towards recovery. Then another vision floated across his memory, a woman, proud, almost threatening, with lofty forehead crowned with golden hair, and lips imperiously curled, violently drove away the former figure, and spoke to her with anger as to a hated rival. And the wounded man, tossing on his camp bedstead, bathed in perspiration, his limbs aching, tried to forget, sought to banish these visions, and, fairly disheartened, asked but to die.

But death, who had halted beside the pillow of so many of his companions, would have none of him. At the end of two months of suffering he had risen, and, staggering, blinded by the daylight, he had issued from his grave-like refuge and began to crawl about in the vivifying sun. His strength promptly returning had enabled him to proceed by short stages to Sidi-Bel-Abbes, then to reach Oran, where the sea air had completed his recovery. There he had resumed duty, and a little sadder since he had escaped from death, he let the days of a life that Fate had not allowed him to shorten slip by with indifference.

Leaning on his window-sill in the heat of this fine evening, he slowly turned over in his mind the events of the last few months, heaved a sigh, and then, drawing back into the room once more, returned to the official letter.

An order to return, the right to embark on board ship, to cross the sea and regain France.

A deep frown furrowed Séverac's forehead, his brow contracted. He resumed his uniform, laid aside for the siesta, placed his cap on his head, and with a resolute gesture left the house. The street sloped downwards towards the town, skirting the old ramparts reared in 1700

by the Spaniards. Patches of brown brickwork had fallen, loosened by the heavy autumn rains. From these ruins sprang perennial shoots of mastich. Some goats under the care of a young Arab girl in a reddish haik, patched with blue and green, were browsing on the scanty herbage growing at the foot of these walls. A rope-maker had set up in the moat, and his wheel could be heard whirring in a shed of planks, whilst the twists of hemp, watched and guided by an almost naked lad, passed swiftly through the wooden teeth of the bosses. Narrow lanes, cool and dark as wells, displayed the square outlines of the roofs of the houses against the sky of a dazzling blue. From time to time the sound of the officer's footfall drew a youthful face to the window of a Jewish dwelling. The curtain waved, touched by a light hand, and in the half shadow a smiling mouth and inviting eyes appeared. Séverac, with his glance cast down, passed on without seeing. Behind him sounded an irritated snapping of fingers, sharp as the clack of castanets, and the curtain fell again.

After having mechanically threaded a labyrinth of little streets opening into the Boulevard Malakoff, the Major emerged on Place Kleber. He directed his steps towards a large house, at the door of which, beneath the tricoloured flag, a soldier on sentry was chatting with an orderly dangling his legs on a stone bench. On perceiving Séverac the sentry sprang to attention, and the orderly rose and saluted.

"Is the General at home?" asked the young officer.

"Yes, Major," replied the orderly.

And preceding Séverac through the paved entrance hall, the soldier opened a door leading to the garden.

Dressed in red uniform trousers with a black stripe and a jacket of white drill, and with his head covered by a broad-brimmed Panama hat, a stout, red-faced man with a bristly grey moustache was engaged in lifting with paternal care a number of bell-glasses, under which some magnificent melons, fed by the rich emanations of a deep hot-bed, were ripening. With a careful finger the stout man felt the rind of each melon just above the green stalk, giving vent to little grunts of satisfaction when ripeness appeared to be

approaching. The sound of the Major's step on the gravel of the path roused him from his contemplation. He turned, and seeing the young officer, gave him a friendly nod.

"Ah! it's you, Séverac. Come and see these marvels, my friend," said the stout man, perspiring with pride under his straw hat. "The true cantalupe. A variety cultivated by me, and with which I shall win every prize at the Horticultural Exhibition at Algiers. They talk of their melons from the Mitidja? Wretched water-melons! not to be compared with my productions. Look at that! the laced cantalupe. It weighs twelve pounds if it does an ounce, and the flesh is as sweet as an apricot. But what is it gives me the pleasure of seeing you?"

And rinsing the manure stains from his hands in a watering-pot, the stout man advanced towards the Major, who had remained at a respectful distance.

"If you will please just to run your eyes over this paper, General, you will see what brings me."

The stout man took the letter that Séverac held out to him with one hand, fixed his eye-glasses on his nose with the other, and after a rapid glance:

"Eh! what! But this is an order of recall, Major. A disguised leave of absence, very likely."

The old soldier had now a stern look; he gnawed his bristly moustache as he turned the official document over between his fingers. In a moment the slightly ludicrous horticulturist had vanished. And Séverac once more saw before him the man whom he had seen three months before in a reconnaissance in the midst of the burning and sandy plains of the "land of thirst," surrounded by a handful of men making head against the swooping dashes of a cloud of Arab horsemen. He could hear him distinctly saying in calm tones:

"We have still cartridges left for an hour's fighting; if the supporting column does not come up in fifty minutes we are done for."

They held out an hour and a half, slackening their fire, economising their last bullets, letting their daring assailants charge up to the very point of their bayonets, and then sending at them the score of troopers constituting their

cavalry, who would dash forward with grim rage, disappearing into the cloud of burnouses to return with one or two men missing, but with sabres reddened to the hilt. Then at the moment when the fatal circle was tightening closer and closer round the little detachment they had heard the rattle of volley firing. And above the sound of strife the ringing blast of the French trumpets sounding a charge had caused a cry of relief to burst from every breast.

And Séverac, before the stern look of this brave soldier, whose only weakness was an ungovernable fancy for horticulture, felt troubled and ill at ease.

"How is it, Major," resumed the General, "that, needing leave of absence, you applied so high? Why did not this permission you have received pass through the hands of your immediate superiors? It is not very regular, Major."

"General, I assure you I should feel these reproaches very deeply if I deserved them. But I do not at all know what this order means. I did not ask for it. And I received it with great astonishment, and, I will admit to you, with some uneasiness. My mother, whom I left alone in France, is in very delicate health. My first idea was that she was very ill, and that my friends at home wished to have me back without telling me plainly for what reason I was recalled. I thought that perhaps you might have been written to, General, and that you would be better informed than myself."

"I have not received any letter, any notification. I am as ignorant as yourself of what it all means," said the General, whose face resumed its smiling and jovial aspect. "But as it is so, that's another matter. I will admit, Séverac, that if you had forgotten what is due to your superiors, I should have been angry. It would have been astonishing, too, that such a fine fellow as yourself should have been capable of such a slight. You will wear a General's epaulettes, too, some day, my friend, and you would not like them to be treated as a mere cipher. But since it is all cleared up, don't let us say any more about it."

"Let us, on the contrary, say something more, General," said Séverac, with vivacity, "for nothing at all is cleared

up. It is above all a piece of advice that I came to ask you for. What would you do if you were in my place ?”

“Faith, my dear fellow, I am getting old now, and I have not an immoderate love of locomotion. The prospect of making a long journey, even to France, would not cause me transports of joy. My great satisfaction is here in this garden, in the midst of my products. But thirty years ago I think that I should not have taken the matter so quietly, and that all the thunders of the Atlas would not have hindered me from embarking.”

“So, General, you would have gone ?”

“It is very probable, Séverac. Moreover, the Minister does not leave you any choice. He recalls you. You must obey. Besides, the penalty is a pleasant one, as the song says. There is nothing to keep you here ; our rascals of Bedouins are no longer kicking up a bobbery in the south ; we gave them a dose of lead pills this autumn that will keep them quiet for some time. You would have nothing to do except to yawn your head off. I do not think that occupation a very urgent one. Go, my dear fellow ; if what you fear is true, you will reach home opportunely to look after your mother. Your presence will restore her to health. Ah ! a mother ! one cannot do too much for her. It is very hard to have a son so far away, and to look at the horizon and say he is over there beyond the farthest clouds on the other side of the sea, separated from me by time and space, and almost lost to me. Ah ! poor woman. Do not lose any time, Séverac ; be off at once.”

“I will go, General.”

“There is the little Government gunboat bound for Toulon in the roadstead ; take your passage on board her. She is a bad sea boat, and it is very likely that you will be fearfully shaken, but you will gain several days. The lieutenant commanding her dines with me this evening ; do me the pleasure to join us. You can settle matters with him whilst smoking a cigar.”

“General, you really overwhelm me,” said Séverac, with an emotion that brought the moisture to his eyes ; “and I do not know how to thank you.”

"Do not thank me," replied the old soldier; "I am a friend of yours; I have seen you at work. We have need of not a few soldiers like you in the army. And then the first in Europe that only ventured to frown—why we should see."

With a stamp of his foot the General smashed an immense slug that was crawling, yellow and slimy, across the path. And taking Séverac gaily by the arm:

"The fact is, I am not sorry you are going to France. I will entrust you with a commission for an old school-fellow of mine, who is director of the Jardin des Plantes. I have some very rare and curious specimens of the African flora for him. Plants brought by Touareg horsemen, and which only grow near the Oasis of Aghades, in the great desert of Timbuctoo."

That very evening Pierre Séverac came to an arrangement with the commander of the despatch boat, and the next day he embarked for France. The trip across, though favoured by admirable weather, seemed long to him. Pacing the deck or leaning against the bulwarks and watching the waves slipping past the vessel's side, he was pursued by one thought. He kept asking himself why this order had been sent. The first idea that had presented itself to his mind, the fear of a serious illness threatening his mother's life, had been replaced by another not less disquieting and still more unfortunate.

He now traced a woman's hand in this favour that had been granted him. And with frowning brow he walked to and fro, striking his heel sharply on the well-scoured deck of the despatch boat. Sarah's face, with its haughty forehead, its threatening look, such as he had seen it in the fever of his dreams when wounded, obstinately rose before him, haunting him with a mocking smile, and he seemed to hear her say:

"You sought to fly me. For a year you have taken refuge in the deserts of Africa, you have risked your life like a madman, thinking to escape me by distance, to free yourself from my yoke by death; but you deceived yourself. You belong to me, and nothing can detach you from me. Any stratagem will be good enough for me to oblige you

to return—I shall make use of my means. You shall not succeed in sheltering yourself from my imperious love. And the proof is that you are on the sea, and that each revolution of the ship's screw brings you nearer to the country where I am. You well know that I adore you; you cannot have forgotten so quickly that you loved me. Look at me; I am beautiful. Do not seek to turn away your eyes. All speaks to you of me, and I have all your recollections for allies. My kisses still burn your lips. You again find the perfume emanating from me when you inhale that of the flowers, and it intoxicates you. I have entered deeply into your being. I possess you. You are my love, my property, my happiness, my life. I am awaiting you, and it is by my wish that you return."

And deeply stirred, his flesh quivering, his heart beating at the recollection of past pleasures, Séverac tried to turn his mind to other thoughts. But Sarah ever reappeared, seizing on him and wearying out his resistance. He shook with anger, and in a transport of rage addressed his imaginary tyrant:

"I hate you! I give you back in disdain all the love that you lavish on me. Between you and me there can be nothing more in common. I love another, who is as sweet as you are violent, as chaste as you are sensual. She is the maiden, purity, snow. You are woman, passion, fire. I turn away from you. You shall not clasp me in your bare arms, you shall no longer make me share your embraces. Leave me; go! And if it is you who have caused my return, you shall not see me. It is thus I will punish you for having forced my will."

Worn out, Séverac slept soundly. The night when he closed his eyes was bright with stars. The breeze, laden with the saltiness of the waves, sang in the rigging. When he awoke the sun was shining, and the coast of France, white with patches of sombre verdure here and there, stretched along the horizon.

By noon the ship was moored in the roadstead of Toulon, and Séverac, having telegraphed to his mother, received a reply evidently penned with some astonishment, in which the good lady assured him that she was

in perfect health, and greatly pleased at his unexpected arrival.

Pierre felt relieved from a great mental weight. He went into the telegraph office a second time, and sent off the following message to his mother. "Shall reach Bois-le-Roi to-morrow. Do not let my return be known at the Chateau de Canalheilles."

The same evening he left by the express

CHAPTER XIV

GOING up the hill towards Bois-le-Roi, in the same vehicle that had taken him away a year ago, Séverac reflected over the past. His existence had been quite devoid of incident during the twelve months he had spent in Algeria. What a contrast between the monotonous regularity of his military life and the incessant agitation of his ordinary worldly existence! By the conscientious way in which he had fulfilled his duties he had become morally stronger, he had had plenty of time for reflection during the long days he had passed in camp, and, realising the depth of his fall, he blamed himself severely.

In the fever of his struggle against Sarah he had revolted despairingly, and defended himself energetically against the young woman's fascinating power. But all his efforts had been in vain, and each step in the right direction had been followed by some fresh fault. It had required nothing less than Blanche's appearance to finally conquer the sensual demon that had taken possession of him. He was well aware that he could claim but little merit for repulsing Sarah from the moment he had fallen in love with Mademoiselle de Cygne.

Snatched from certain death by a miracle, he was no longer the same man. The weak and easily managed Pierre, who had been a mere plaything in Sarah's hands, had remained behind in the Mussulman temple, on the marble floor covered with religious inscriptions. He who had returned had the same face, the same voice, but another

heart, swayed by an indomitable will. He had resolutely faced what the future had in store for him, and had calculated his hopes. He felt that happiness could only be found with Blanche, and that Sarah was more than ever an insurmountable obstacle between the young girl and himself. And even had the Count consented to give his niece to him, a young fellow without birth or fortune, how should he find courage to inform Sarah of his contemplated marriage with Blanche?

Thus all was over, and nothing remained but to bravely make the sacrifice, and concentrate all his thoughts, all his ambition, on his military career, which was a brilliant one, and might console him for his many troubles. During the campaign he had displayed a rare amount of courage, intelligence, and energy, and he knew that he was appreciated by his superiors, and that he might hope to attain the highest grades in the service. Even now he was looked upon as one of the future chiefs of the young army. With a smiling melancholy, he told himself that he would become a selfish old bachelor, living with his mother.

And yet one thought often made him start. Mademoiselle de Cygne would certainly marry. Some man would be fortunate enough to share his life with this adorable woman. He then made one last effort, and resolutely determined to love the man she loved. She would have children, and he, the old bachelor, would have the right to pass his hand over their fair heads, and to kiss the dear little beings, the living images of their mother. And then, perhaps, he might have the opportunity of protecting them in life, of advising them, and defending them. He might thus continue to religiously adore the woman whom he had dreamed of as a companion, and live near her, within the charm of her grave and affectionate nature. He would be a sort of adopted uncle, and thus be enabled to support life. In this way he deceived himself. He persuaded himself that he would find a pure joy in this relative happiness. And, full of confidence, he returned to face Sarah's wily arts. The carriage was just passing the spot where he had seen Blanche for the last time. He leant out as he had done that morning, and looked all along the deep avenue. It was deserted.

The Chateau was wrapped in silence, but the open shutters announced that it was occupied. In the garden, some men were leisurely at work trimming the shrubs and weeding the flower-beds. Séverac's heart sank within him, and with a vague feeling of sadness he threw himself back in the carriage. A quarter of an hour later on he alighted in front of his house.

He opened the door, which creaked on its hinges, and entered. The garden was just as he had seen it in his ominous vision. The grass on the lawn was looking green, and the birds were chirping and chasing each other along the edges of the well-kept walks and in the thickets. On the steps he saw his mother, with a beaming face, coming towards him with outstretched arms, and instead of a sad and despairing solitude, he found a sweet and happy life.

The first few hours of his stay in this house where he had spent his youthful days were really delicious. In the little drawing-room, seated near his mother, who was never tired of looking at and questioning him, he forgot his troubles

Everyone and everything smiled on him, the old domestic who had nursed him as a child, the man-servant, his father's old orderly, the room where he had passed his careless, youthful days, both persons and objects, appeared to him in a happy light, which eased his mind and soothed his heart. After the fatigue of his journey he slept soundly. He forgot everything, and plunged into recollections of his childhood's days. He fancied himself a boy again, and in the morning, half asleep, half awake, he lay in bed, hearing all that went on in the house, not stirring, but lingering in voluptuous idleness. For three days he lived like this, having banished from his memory the cruel thought of the incidents which his return to France was about to provoke. He said to himself: "This is a pleasant time, let us enjoy it fully." And not once during these quiet hours did the phantom of Sarah spring up between him and his mother.

The fourth day, after breakfast, having smoked a cigar in the garden, Séverac went out by a little gate leading into the forest. He was dressed in a linen blouse, with an old straw hat on his head. Carried away by the charm of

his walk, he was soon far beyond the bounds of Bois-le-Roi. It was about one o'clock. He was following a grassy road leading to Franchard, when nearly a hundred yards from him he observed a movement going on under the trees. Servants were carrying dishes, and farther on could be heard the loud conversation and the laughter of their masters, installed beneath the spreading foliage.

Séverac, who had been walking along in a dreamy way, gazed more attentively, and stopping by the side of the road recognised the Count's black and yellow drag. He suddenly turned back. Another step and, the attention of one of the domestics being attracted by the arrival of a pedestrian in this retired spot, he might have been recognised. He withdrew under the trees and came to a standstill. A violent emotion had suddenly benumbed his legs, and he stood there, motionless, his heart beating quickly, with a cloud before his eyes. Blanche was, no doubt, a few yards from him. By going a little nearer, screened by the foliage, he might perhaps hear her voice, and distinguish her features.

He walked on cautiously, hiding behind the bushes, exercising more care than when he was reconnoitring in Algeria, risking at each step the fire of some Arab. If he had been caught in the act of spying thus it would have overwhelmed him with shame, and yet, attracted by an irresistible force, he could not help advancing. From behind some thick brambles he could now see what was going on. The Count and his guests were lunching in a clearing in the wood, near a limpid stream which flowed between enormous blocks of granite over a clear sandy bed. A varnished folding-screen, laid on a framework supported by bamboo legs, formed the table. This light structure was covered with a damask cloth, on which glittered a handsome service of plate. Cases filled with ice, and containing the champagne, stood open on the grass, and the various dishes in large metal boxes were awaiting the moment for being handed round. Some very comfortable camp-stools served as seats. Two immense Japanese parasols, of gay colours and fantastic design, shielded the guests from the rays of the sun which penetrated between the branches. Surrounded by this verdant framework, and

seated before this sumptuous and original table, these men in light suits and ladies in bright coloured robes, gaily lunching, attended on by grave footmen, formed quite a charming picture.

It seemed to Pierre that a year could not have elapsed, and that he had been dreaming. He again met now the same people who were sojourning at Canalheilles when he went away. Pompéran had just left off in the midst of the chorus to the latest fashionable song to kiss his young wife seated beside him. Merlot, bristling like a lion, was glaring in a furious manner at La Lavinière, who was talking to Madeleine. The Count was laughing, happy for the time being, and enjoying the gaiety of his guests. Sarah, who seemed absorbed, was listening, carelessly, to Mrs Smarden's description of a robe she had just ordered of a fashionable dressmaker.

"A marvel, my dear, with such buttons for the corsage! cats'-eyes and brilliants; a *chef d'œuvre*! My husband sent me the cats'-eyes from Chicago. By-the-by, he is coming to Paris, and I shall have the pleasure of introducing him to you. You've heard me talk so much about him, without seeing him, that you must often wonder if he really exists!"

But Sarah was not paying the least attention to Mrs Smarden, her thoughts were travelling far from Fontainebleau. She was wondering in a vague, dreamy way, where he whom she loved was at that moment. And the beautiful American's voice buzzed confusedly in her ears. Opposite her, Blanche, smiling sweetly, was caressing Fane, whose bright eyes, beaming with intelligence, were fixed on hers. The young girl was a trifle paler. Her face, slightly thinner, had assumed a more marked appearance of proud gravity. Her plate remained empty before her. She replied with smiling affability when anyone spoke to her, but a touch of melancholy, almost invisible to indifferent eyes, clouded her beautiful brow. Pierre was grievously affected at the sight of her. He thought her changed. He stood there, forgetting all prudence, looking at her, advancing from his place of concealment, and devouring with his eyes that charming face, which he had had before him day and night, for the last year.

In turning aside the branches, his hand caused a rustling in the bushes, and he promptly started back. But Fane, escaping from Mademoiselle de Cygne's caresses, had already rushed forward barking. Séverac ran away, plunging into the thick underwood, closely followed by the dog, which, no longer barking, had set up a cry of joy, and jumped around its friend. Séverac stopped, and seeing himself safe, took Fane's head in his hands, as the dog stood up and placed its paws on his shoulders, and then he passionately kissed the smooth and shining spot where Blanche sometimes placed her lips. After ordering the dog to go back, he quickly walked away.

"Who the deuce was it prowling around us?" asked the Count, on seeing Séverac's linen blouse disappear behind the bushes.

"Some faggot-cutter, no doubt," replied Pompéran. "Just look how he's running off, followed by Fane. He has good legs, but the dog will bite his calves all the same."

Suddenly the barking ceased, and gave place to a succession of soft and caressing whinings. Sarah felt a violent shock at her heart, and half rose up, but quickly sat down again on observing that Blanche was looking at her. They had both recognised the cry of joy that Fane used formerly to set up on seeing Pierre arrive at Canalheilles; and at the same time they said to themselves, "It's he!"

The dog came back slowly, as if with regret. The young girl called Fane, caressed her, and during the rest of the promenade kept her by her side as if her favourite, now doubly dear, had retained something of him whom she had approached.

Pierre returned to Bois-le-Roi in a very thoughtful mood. This meeting, which he had not sought for, was a decisive proof for him. He had understood, on feeling himself so irresistibly attracted towards Blanche, how far he was from being master of himself. He had thought he was stronger; had hoped to be able to meet the young girl's look with a tranquil heart and untroubled spirit, instead of which he had lost his head at the first sight of her from a distance, and had run the risk of being surprised in an equivocal

position and a ridiculous costume. What would it be if he were near her? Would not his confusion betray the secret that he wished to conceal in the innermost recesses of his heart? And what terrible complications might not result from this disclosure of his sentiments? He felt the ground trembling beneath him, and had a clear idea of the danger he would incur if he went to Canalheilles. He foresaw the misfortunes that Sarah might cause in her jealous rage, for he knew how violent she was, and had not forgotten what it had cost him to obtain his temporary liberty. He knew Sarah was waiting for him, and that although she had had the courage to bear the separation, she would not willingly resign herself to his abandonment. He concluded that he must go away without seeing her again, and firmly resolved to do so.

Having spent a few days with his mother, he had nothing more to do in France. Immediately on his arrival he had called at the War Office, where the officials, greatly astonished at his questions, had been unable to inform him of the reason of his recall. They had looked amongst the papers: there was nothing. The order had been sent direct from the Minister. He must wait. The Minister was very busy; the Chamber, the Committees, etc. They would see. In Pierre's opinion there was nothing more to be seen. He would simply ask to return to his post. He thought that by his resisting Sarah's tyrannical will he would be giving a desirable proof of energy.

He did not wish to alarm his mother by announcing his departure without having a plausible explanation to offer at the same time. He had certain business to attend to in Paris, and he wished above all to see Frossard, in whom he had the greatest confidence; through him he could learn what had taken place during his absence. Then on his return in the evening he would tell his mother that he had received the order from the War Office to proceed to Algeria immediately. In this way he thought he had arranged everything to prevent any surprise. He carried out his programme to the letter, took the morning train in order to be sure not to meet any of the Canalheilles party along the line, and arrived in Paris at an early hour.

Frossard, who had succeeded Bonchamps, possessed one of the best practices in Paris. This big fellow, although rendered timid by love, was one of the sharpest and cleverest men of business it would be possible to meet with. The only son of a father who had made a fortune in the silk trade, he paid Bonchamps 800,000 francs for his practice. After occupying for more than sixty years the first floor of a wretched house in the Rue Sainte-Anne the offices were transferred, about ten years ago, to the first floor of one of the most magnificent buildings in the Rue du Quatre-Septembre.

On arriving at the office at nine o'clock, Séverac found four clerks there busy at work. In an adjoining apartment separating the office from Frossard's private room the head clerk, dictating in a low voice, was correcting the clauses of a partnership deed. Pierre advanced into the middle of the large office furnished with tables containing pigeon-hole receptacles, and having on all sides, from the floor to the ceiling, oak compartments in which the papers of all the clients of the house were deposited. An old woman with a yellow and wrinkled face, a basket in her hand, and wearing a black Orleans dress, a faded Ternaux shawl, darned like a bit of old lace, and a little bonnet adorned with paper flowers, grey with dust, stuck despairingly to the table of one of the clerks, who was doing his best to get rid of this obstinate client.

"But, madame, we can't go quicker than the judges. You must wait till the end of the suit which is now pending."

"And how are we to live?" cried the old woman, with a tragic air. "They are robbing us; our income is attached. We have no further resources. My son-in-law is ill with despair. You should apply to the Court for an allowance."

"The Court has already granted one. You've pledged it. So much the worse for you!"

"The property in dispute, and which will certainly be restored to us, is of considerable value, and we are dying of hunger meanwhile. Could not Maître Frossard make us some advance?"

"He's a notary, not a banker. You had better write to him, madame."

"I'll wait for him"

"He's not in, and I can't say when he will be Excuse me, madame, I have someone else to attend to."

The clerk had caught sight of Séverac, and escaping from the old woman, and hardened to scenes of this sort, which occurred every day, he went up to the young man.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

"I wish to see Maître Frossard," said Pierre, quite touched by the heart-breaking distress owned to by the old woman.

"He is away," replied the clerk, looking at Pierre, and not recognising in him an importunate client. "But will you walk into the head clerk's room?"

Whilst speaking he made a sign to Séverac to let him know that Frossard was there. The old woman went away muttering indistinct words in a disconsolate voice. When she had closed the glass door the clerk broke out:

"If we let all those people into the governor's room, we shouldn't be able to do any business at all. This good lady has been coming four or five times a week to the office during the past year. We are forced to listen to her story. No doubt she is to be pitied; but there are so many others. I'll send your card in. Monsieur Plantin, just go and see if the governor is disengaged, and at the same time bring Guérinot's bill of sale. Will you sit down, sir?"

Séverac glanced carelessly at the great auction sale-bills, yellow, blue, and red, which were affixed to the wall. In one corner stood an enormous safe, which appeared to hide in its iron-bound sides the fortunes of several millionaire clients. A quick step gliding over the floor was then heard. The clerks, who were gazing about vacantly, immediately bent over the stamped paper they were engrossing, and Maître Frossard appeared at the door. Without saying a word he took his friend by the hand, led him across the little office in which the principal clerk was still dictating in a droning voice, and pushed him into his private room, a large apartment with ebony furniture, and hung with bottle-green plush.

"What! it's you!" cried he. "What does this mean?"

"When did you arrive? Nothing serious the matter, is there?"

All these questions were blurted out one after the other with a warm and tender vivacity. At the same time he gave Séverac a hearty shake of the hand and looked at him, his eyes sparkling with joy.

"Anything serious? Oh no, my dear fellow," replied Pierre. "Official matters—and I did not like to go back without having seen you."

"I should rather think not! But you speak of going back. When did you arrive?"

A cloud passed over Séverac's features. Frossard's curiosity made him feel awkward. He foresaw other questions which might necessitate his making some painful confession. However, he did not wish to say anything that wasn't true.

"I've been here four days."

"Four days. By Jove! And you talk of going away?"

There was a pause. Frossard hesitated about continuing. At last he decided to do so.

"Have you been to Canaheilles?" asked he.

Pierre looked away with his head down, feeling that the moment had come when it would be very difficult for him to reply.

"No," said he resolutely. "I've not been, and don't intend to go. This will cause me great regret, but I must leave without a moment's delay."

Frossard saw his friend so embarrassed, so troubled, that he did not dare to insist. He remembered Pierre's sad looks and constrained attitude when he was at the Count's house before his departure.

He changed the conversation, determined to come back, by another way, to this question which so troubled his friend, and to get to the bottom of it, whether he liked it or not.

"It's all the more kind of you to have found time to come and see me," resumed he. "Ah! my dear fellow, you've caused us a deal of anxiety, we thought you were dead. It appears that you had been seriously wounded,

and that a little more, and you would not have come back to us."

"Yes," replied Séverac, with a sad smile. Then, as if anxious to speak of something else: "But, let's talk about yourself. What are you doing? Are you still in love? When are you going to marry?"

"Alas, my dear Pierre, my love affairs do not prosper so well as my business ones. My clients increase daily, and my practice is now one of the largest in Paris, but Colonel Merlot treats me worse and worse every day, and I am afraid I shall never marry his daughter if I wait for his consent. And yet I cannot allow my future wife to take action against her father. A notary! That would never do! I am in fact in a very unfortunate position. And I really do not know what I should do without Mademoiselle de Cygne, who assists me as much as she possibly can, and procures me the rare moments during which I can talk freely to her friend. Ah! Pierre, what a delicious young girl Blanche is! And what a wife she will make! We have often talked about you. She used to question me, wanting to know where you were, what you were doing. She used to read the newspapers to have tidings of the expedition. And when she heard that you were wounded——. It was one evening in the little drawing-room in the Faubourg St Honoré—they had just finished tea—the Count had received a letter from the War Office. He began to read it, and suddenly turned pale. The Colonel asked him what was the matter. Then, quite overcome, and with a choking voice the Count replied, 'A great misfortune! In the last engagement poor Séverac received a ball in his chest.' My dear fellow, if you had seen the crushing effect of this reply, you would have understood how you are loved in that house. The Countess started up, quite pale, without saying a word, but was seized with a shivering which lasted all the evening. As to Blanche, she murmured, 'Oh! my God!' and shut her eyes as if she could see you lying there before her, covered with blood. A moment after she went out quietly, followed by Mademoiselle Merlot, and when she came back, a quarter of an hour afterwards, she was very calm, but I could see she had been weeping."

Little by little, Pierre, listening to his friend, had given way to a feeling of emotion, and with his eyes fixed on the wall, his lips compressed, he remained motionless, not daring to speak, and doing his utmost to conceal the feeling which overpowered him.

Frossard ceased speaking, and looked at Pierre. With a brusque cordiality he took his friend's hand, and shaking it heartily, exclaimed :

"Come, Pierre, have you no confidence in me now? I have known you for the last twenty years, and if you were my brother, I could not have more real affection than I have for you. You've also a great regard for me, I know, and yet you hide your secret from me—for you have a secret, I saw it at once, when I spoke of *Mademoiselle de Cygne*. Come! tell me everything! it will do you good. You love her, don't you?"

Séverac still wished to remain silent, but in spite of all his efforts, he felt he must confess, and could not resist the pleasure of confiding his troubles to this tender-hearted friend, so well able to understand and console him. He sank into a chair, and burying his face in his hands, exclaimed :

"Yes, I do love her, passionately, and I am the most miserable of men, for she can never be mine."

"Why not?" asked Frossard gently, feeling that he was approaching the important point of the situation.

Pierre shook his head in despair :

"Because I am not free."

"You?"

"Yes," said Pierre, giving way entirely, "I am suffering greatly, I am full of remorse, I have abused the confidence and friendship of a good and upright man. And, as a just vengeance, the bad action I have committed is now causing the misery of my whole life."

"Oh! oh! a married woman," said Frossard, with the tranquillity of a man whose business had habituated him to these serious cases.

"Our intercourse has lasted a year, full of pleasure for her, full of trouble for me. I have never really loved this woman; I have submitted to her. She took possession of

me; she bewitched me. She knew how to drown my scruples, and quiet my fears. And benumbed, unnerved, I at last obeyed no other will than hers."

"What about the husband? Did he never suspect anything?"

"He always showed me the greatest affection, and placed the blindest confidence in me."

"Heart-breaking! but common enough," replied Frosard. "Well, my dear fellow, you need not tell me any more; I understand your affair as well as you do yourself. Just as you commenced to shake off the yoke of this charming but despotic mistress you saw Mademoiselle de Cygne. The young girl had the exquisite sweetness, the virginal grace, that the woman had not. The snow of the one appeared charming beside the fire of the other. It was the Jung Frau on the one hand and Vesuvius on the other. Refreshed, reanimated, and carried away, you have ceased to love with your senses, and commenced to love with your heart. What more simple and natural! Why, my dear fellow, it's the same thing with all young men, and the whole has been summed up in that well-known, indulgent adage, 'Young men must sow their wild oats' I don't see why you need assume these tragical airs. As you have lived out of France for a year, you have naturally broken with her. What! because this woman yielded herself to you for a time, does she imagine that you are going to remain faithful to her all your life? She's married. You will also marry."

"No," said Pierre gravely; "I must abandon all hope. The woman to whom I belong is not one of those from whom one can separate to marry another. Our common sin binds us firmly together, and I tremble at the thought that she might read my conscience. I know her to be violent and dangerous. In an angry moment she would be capable of committing some mad action which would ruin her beyond all hope. If you only knew what struggles it cost me to obtain her permission to go away a year ago! I didn't breathe freely till I was far away. Between her and she whom I love my life was a burden, and I swear to you that I have cruelly expiated my fault."

"Yes, yes," replied Frossard, becoming thoughtful, "that's what people call happiness! And one runs after it and does everything in the world to obtain it! One consents to deceive a man one esteems, to never enter his house without a feeling of uneasiness, to dread the least indiscretion, to watch every word, every gesture, to be perpetually on the alert. And what is the love that one steals in this way?"

"Troubled, never knowing the security of calm and quiet evenings, hastening to an assignation in the daytime, and closing the shutters to procure the illusion of night, leading to violent scenes in which the lovers reproach each other with the sacrifices they have made, the woman her duties, the man his liberty. So that after a period of cruel bickerings and bitter discussions they finish, after having loved with constraint, by hating without reserve, and wounding even more than they had caressed each other."

Pierre did not reply. Frossard stole a glance at his friend, and commenced thinking. A certain phrase had struck him whilst Séverac was relating the affair. "She is violent and dangerous." In spite of himself, Sarah's proud profile and sphinx-like eyes had arisen in his memory. The implacable, dangerous woman from whom his friend feared some mad act, was it not the beautiful Englishwoman, whom he himself knew to be fantastic and daring? And the husband, whose friendship and confidence had caused Pierre to blush so painfully, it must be the Count de Canahelles. And the good-hearted Frossard, suddenly enlightened, now understood why Pierre was so sad, and why he turned aside from Mademoiselle de Cygne, from whom he was separated by an insurmountable barrier. Certainly, it must be that. And the young lawyer saw the difficulties of his friend's position. Poor fellow! How sincerely he pitied him! He no longer had any desire to joke, nor did he say in a careless way, "It's an adventure common with most young men; young men must sow their wild oats." The affair might turn out to be very serious. The General was not a man to be trifled with, and he was sincerely attached to his wife. If he discovered anything, Séverac would be in the greatest danger. He might even

lose his life over the affair. As to that, the young man would not defend himself. And even if he tried to defend himself, what chance would he have against the Count, who handled his sword in such a way that he could give points to the youngest of his officers, and who brought down the dolls of the shooting gallery with frightful precision? But how had Pierre been guilty of this treason? And yet, did not Sarah's passion explain everything? It was she who loved, it was she who had caused the crime. Frossard admired the consummate art with which she had managed to conceal her intrigue with Séverac. She had a singular power over herself. Nothing had betrayed her passion. However, he now recollected certain looks, and certain words, which had astonished him at the time. She loved Séverac; that was the reason she trembled so the evening the Count announced that Pierre had been dangerously wounded. He said to himself that she must in reality be a dangerous woman, and that she would never release Séverac. And to save him from her would require some exceptional measures. Moreover, he was not at all sure that something terrible would not happen, even now.

"So it's for that you are going away so quickly," said he, continuing his train of thought.

"Yes; and you are not astonished now. In my fall I have still preserved a certain amount of honesty, and for nothing in this world would I consent to again wear the fetters I have broken. I have resolved to go away, and I will go. Over there, in Africa, I shall be free to suffer without being obliged to dissimulate, and I can weep when I like."

He paused a moment, as if choked with emotion.

"And then, above all, my dear Frossard, there's always plenty of fighting going on there," resumed he firmly.

"No doubt the campaign will shortly be resumed. There will be plenty of bullets exchanged, and I promise you, that the one that touches me shall do its errand this time."

"In other words, you are going to try and get yourself killed?" exclaimed Frossard.

Pierre laughed nervously.

"My dear fellow, I've been trying to do so for the last

year, and you see I have not succeeded. Remember Marshal Ney, galloping over the field of Waterloo, and crying, 'I should like to feel all those bullets in my body.' He died a miserable death at the corner of a wall. Who knows whether I also shall not die in a miserable way? Death is a coquette who refuses those who desire her. But no, I don't think I shall be miserable always, and the expected hour will come at last. That day, Frossard, when you read in the papers that Major Séverac is dead, a great many people, who had seen me risk my life like a madman, will say, 'That fellow had a very weak head.' You alone, who know the motives which prompted me, will say, 'No, he had a sad heart.' You will shed a tear because you loved me; but I beg you not to regret me too much, for I shall cease to require pity on finding rest, forgetfulness, and, I hope, pardon."

The walls of this room, a veritable family confessional, had already heard many heart-breaking confessions, many painful secrets; but never had Frossard been so seriously impressed as by this narrative. By the tone of his friend's voice he had recognised an invincible determination. If Pierre went away he would certainly finish by getting killed. It was a miracle that he had not already succeeded in doing so, considering how firmly he wished it. But how to prevent him going away? And if he remained, would he not be exposed to worse danger? In Algeria, on the battlefield, he only risked his life, in France, amidst all these intrigues, it was a question not only of his life but of his honour. There, under the enemy's fire, it would be a glorious end, the causes of which would remain unknown, whilst here, a duel with an outraged husband would be a miserable death, the motives of which would be scandalously exposed.

Frossard did not hesitate, Pierre must go away. In his own mind he quite approved of his friend's resolve, and the esteem he had for him only became greater. He could not repress a sigh of regret on thinking of Mademoiselle de Cygne, but he was not astonished, being accustomed by his profession to seeing human projects crossed by continual difficulties. However, he tried to cheer his friend up.

"Your position is certainly a very serious one," said he, with an easy air; "but no position was ever entirely hopeless. A more pliant man than you, one less rigid in his ideas, would easily get out of the difficulty in which you now find yourself, and that with honour. He would bring his mistress to accept his marriage by proving to her that it was a question of his future, and he would induce her to sacrifice herself by showing her a heroic part to be played, one of those acts of celestial devotion which place a woman on a level with the angels. Nowadays it is not rare to see married women find wives for their lovers. At a certain moment a curious but easily explained transformation takes place in women's hearts. There is in every feminine passion a fund of maternal tenderness which it is very easy to take advantage of. By allowing a woman to see that she will be your providence, your guardian angel, the agent of your salvation, it is easy to induce her to sacrifice herself. She says to herself, 'I shall be a second mother to him, I shall have given him a real existence in procuring his happiness'; and as women are easily satisfied with phrases and forms, the devoted angel lays down the principle that she has been sublime, and lives on that, contemplating her work with a loving eye. But in order to bring about such a result one must be familiar with all the arts of Parisian life. You are not one of those fellows who know how to take advantage of a criminal love to obtain a legitimate happiness. Follow then your course loyally and bravely. Go away, as it is necessary, but for God's sake don't commit any extravagance. Everything can be repaired except a broken head. Instead of trying to get killed, try and lead a quiet life; you can never tell what the future may have in store for you, and Time is a great master. Over there you'll be quiet, and who knows whether you would be so under ground?"

Pierre shook his head without replying.

"Come, when do you think of leaving?" asked Frossard.

"To-morrow, by the seven o'clock express."

"Well, come and dine with me, and I'll go to the station with you. Between this and then I'll think over the matter; perhaps I, being cool, may be able to find an

honourable expedient for procuring you, if not a happy, at least a peaceful, existence. I am thoroughly heart-broken by what you have divulged to me. I certainly suspected some delicate affair, but never thought of anything so serious as this."

Pierre had risen, and was walking towards the door.

"I thoroughly depend on you," resumed Frossard. "Don't fail me, for I should never forgive you. It's understood, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Séverac, "I'll see you to-morrow. And many thanks for your encouraging words, my dear Frossard. But not a syllable, eh?"

"A lawyer, my dear fellow, keeps a secret as faithfully as a priest."

They crossed the principal office, in which several people were waiting. A lady, very handsome, and very stylish looking, on perceiving Pierre and Frossard, rose up quickly, darted a provoking glance at the grave young man, and giving the lawyer a gracious nod—

"My dear Maître Frossard," said she, "I have been waiting nearly an hour for you."

"I am very sorry, madame, I was engaged, I am now at your service. Monsieur Plantin, show this lady into my room. Excuse me, madame."

And he went into the ante-room with Séverac, and there, shaking his friend's hand, he resumed.

"You saw that little woman? Well, two years ago she made a love match, and to-day she is pleading for a separation. Everything happens, my boy, good as well as evil. Remember that, and hope on."

Pierre did not reply, but smiled sadly. He had long given up all hope. Frossard gazed after his friend for a minute, and then went back to his room, sad and thoughtful.

About five o'clock, just as he had completed the draft of an important liquidation deed, one of his clerks brought him a letter, the well-known writing of which filled him with emotion. On the wax seal the Count de Canalheilles' arms stood out with superb clearness. Frossard, who, the previous day, would have opened the letter without hesitation,

kept it in his hands, irresolute, his heart beating, afraid of learning some bad news.

"Really, it's too stupid," murmured he, and tearing open the envelope, he read these simple lines :

"MY DEAR MAÎTRE FROSSARD,—We have just learnt that Séverac has unexpectedly arrived at Bois-le-Roi. The Countess has sent him an invitation to dinner to-morrow. Pray join us: I'm sure you will be pleased to see your friend."

Frossard sat down and read the letter over twice. The Countess had written to Pierre to invite him to Canalheilles on the morrow. It would be very difficult for the young fellow to refuse such an invitation. Under what pretext could he decline? He would risk arousing the Count's suspicions, and, above all, he would risk irritating the redoubtable Sarah. Thus, just as Pierre thought he had recovered his liberty, by giving up everything, the bonds he had broken became stronger than ever. Frossard, greatly agitated, was trying to think of a way of taking advantage of this grave situation. Perhaps he might be able to assist his friend in his work of self-deliverance. Placed between Mademoiselle de Cygne and the Countess, Pierre would certainly have to submit to a terrible ordeal, but suppose he were to come out of it safe and finally liberated?

At this thought Frossard felt himself full of audacity; marching up and down the room, his head on fire, he tried to invent some knowing intrigue, some cunning plan. He said to himself:

"Really, I'm becoming quite a comedy lawyer! Dancourt must have thought of me when writing 'The Good-Natured Lawyer.' Bah! the end justifies the means! After all, is not everything a sort of comedy nowadays? To snatch Pierre from a wicked woman, save the husband's honour, procure the happiness of the young and persecuted girl, and, who knows, perhaps at the same time dupe the rough old Colonel? What a splendid drama! And played, too, by flesh and blood actors! Ah! if I could only carry it through to the denouement, and conclude it with two marriages! What a triumph!"

He looked at the clock.

"A quarter past five," said he. "Suppose I went down to Canalheilles this evening? To-morrow is Sunday, I can afford to take a holiday. I can go by the six o'clock train and arrive at half-past seven, in time for dinner, and set up my batteries at once."

He rang the bell, and his managing clerk came in.

"I'm going away on important business," said he, thinking it necessary to intimate to the office that there was no rest for a notary, even on a Sunday. "I shall be back on Monday at eleven o'clock. See that the current business is disposed of."

And he went into his private apartments to prepare for the journey, whilst the managing clerk, returning to the office, exclaimed:

"Gentlemen, I depend on you to finish the work; the governor wants me to go out for him."

A quarter of an hour after Frossard's departure, there was not a soul left in the office.

CHAPTER XV

THE Countess had not written to Séverac, she had gone in person to Bois-le-Roi. On returning from the lunch in the forest, at which Pierre, like a fawn watching nymphs through the boughs, had skirted the clearing where the party from Canalheilles were joyously finishing their repast, she had made up her mind to be satisfied. Her perturbed spirit could not bear the doubt. Had Pierre returned, and if so, how long since? Was he inclined to come to the Chateau, or did he wish to remain in retirement? He could very well avoid paying attention to a letter by asserting that he had not received it. And then, would not a letter put him on the alert? Perhaps on learning that his presence was known he might suddenly leave. She mistrusted him. She wished to arrive suddenly and surprise him in his lair, so that he could not escape her.

The good curé of Bois-le-Roi, who dined at the Chateau, became her innocent accomplice. Cleverly questioned, he told the Countess of Séverac's arrival. Sarah was, therefore, able to announce to the Count that his ex-aide-de-camp had returned. The Count manifested a lively joy mingled with no little astonishment. How was it Pierre had not written to inform him? Perhaps the young officer wished to surprise his mother. Having found the shadow of a pretext to excuse Séverac's silence, the General was satisfied with it. Of very superficial mind, he willingly contented himself with the surface aspect of things, and did not take the trouble to go to the bottom of them. Above all, he detested a puzzle. He therefore accepted Sarah's explanation, and wrote to Frossard, who, on the strength of his love for Madeleine, had become one of the familiar friends of the house.

The next morning Sarah drove along through the forest to Bois-le-Roi. Pierre had gone out two hours before. But his mother was at home in her little drawing-room, with its floor waxed and polished with provincial neatness, engaged, according to her habit, in knitting socks for the village children. Sarah, a little disconcerted at finding the old lady alone, laid herself out to charm the mother of him whom she loved, evinced a friendly anger at Pierre not having come to Canalheilles, and declared that the Count and herself absolutely reckoned on seeing him there the next day; and having thus quite cut off the fugitive's retreat, she drove back in her chaise, attracting all the gossips of the countryside to their doors as she passed.

On returning from Paris at seven o'clock Pierre found his mother walking up and down the superb avenue of chestnut trees in front of the house, in expectation of his coming. The old lady leant with pleasure on the arm of the son whom she had feared to lose, and as they slowly returned home, said:

"The Countess de Canalheilles came to see me this morning: she had learnt that you were here, and wanted to scold you for not having been to the Chateau yet. I do not wish to reproach you, since it is in order to be with me that you have neglected your friends. But you must go

and see the General. You know how fond he is of you. You are expected to dinner to-morrow."

The tallest tree in the avenue falling on Pierre would not have crushed him more completely than the news of the step taken by the Countess. He made no reply. He saw in a moment all his prudent calculations upset: he foresaw terrible misfortunes. He was on the point of crying out, as he had done in Frossard's office, "No, I will not go."

The shame of acknowledging the truth to his mother checked the exclamation on his lips. He would not reveal the sin of which he had been guilty to this strict and pious woman, nor force her, who was so proud of him, to judge and condemn him. He resigned himself to brave the danger which a secret mistrust warned him he was about to run.

He experienced, however, a bitter joy in thinking that he should find one compensation in the fact of seeing Blanche. He even arrived at the point of no longer regretting being obliged to go to Canalheilles. His conscience was easy. He had done all in his power not to find himself again face to face with Sarah. Fate compelled him to follow a different path to that which he had traced out for himself. He would follow it. Besides, he promised himself to behave prudently, to gain time, and not to compromise the situation, relatively a satisfactory one, which he had been able to create for himself at the price of so many efforts and so many torments.

It was with a terrible throbbing at his heart that he arrived next day at the gate of the dwelling which formerly he used to enter careless and happy. He crossed the large courtyard, and turned his steps towards the gardens. Joyful exclamations reached him. On the lawn stretching in front of the Chateau to the edge of the ornamental water, a match at lawn tennis was in progress. From the terrace a dozen spectators were looking on at the players, applauding the dashing strokes, and encouraging the side which seemed to be getting the worst of it. Pierre halted at an angle of the balustrade, putting off the moment when he would have to make his appearance. He felt his mind a

blank, and his legs trembling. It seemed to him that he would not be able to force a single word from his contracted throat. Suddenly a burst of applause was heard. A stroke had decided the victory, and the players, bat in hand, and in their picturesque costumes, were returning to the Chateau.

Pierre was ashamed of his weakness, and advanced resolutely on to the terrace. The Count turned, clapped his hands together, and with a radiant face and open arms took three steps towards Séverac. An irresistible impulse seized Séverac, and before he had time to reflect, he found himself clasped to the old man's breast.

"Ah my dear boy, how glad I am to see you. Sarah, it's Séverac."

And he kept looking at him, taking him by the shoulder, touching him as though seeking to discover whether his wound had damaged him in any way, and displaying in all its sincerity the affection that he felt for the son of his friend.

Pierre and Sarah remained face to face. They had shaken hands, and looked at one another without being able to speak a word. Sarah had never been so beautiful. The exquisite oval of her face had slightly lengthened, and beneath her golden tresses her forehead shone white and firm as marble. Her eyes, around which a faint ring had been traced by the violent agitation she had endured in secret, shone brighter than ever. The weather having been very warm for the close of September, she had assumed a very simple white costume. A pink ribbon, fastened by a chased silver buckle, encircled her slender waist, and between the sleeve of her dress, gathered tightly below the elbow, and the wide top of her Swedish kid glove, a glimpse of her white arm, delicately veined with blue, was visible. Her lips moved silently, whilst her eyes rested on those of Pierre, and the young officer guessed that she was murmuring, "I love you."

She was at this moment transfigured by joy. She beamed with love; and Séverac was able to understand how vast was the passion she felt for him.

Forced to exchange some commonplace remarks with

him whom she adored, she was able to impart to them an emphasis which gave them quite another value; and under the eyes of twenty others she found means of lavishing upon Pierre the sweetest assurances and the most impassioned protestations. Fearing to trouble and disturb her, Séverac smiled at her. This forced smile Sarah took for a mute answer to her ardent protestations. With joy in her heart, veiling her intoxication, she withdrew a few steps, and Pierre had leisure to look for Blanche.

Accompanied by Madeleine, she was approaching along an avenue of chestnut-trees, the fallen leaves of which rustled as her dress caught them up. It was thus that Séverac, during the fever arising from his wound, had ever seen her—in this frame of verdure, beside these calm still waters reflecting the blue sky, and with this slow, sad step. He shuddered, it seemed to him that the reality was a continuation of his dream. He wished to go and meet her, but a glance from Frossard restrained him. He recovered himself. They all surrounded him, overwhelming him with questions. He was only able to bow coldly and respectfully to Mademoiselle de Cygne, when he would have liked to have knelt and devoutly kissed the trace of her footsteps. Frossard succeeded in drawing him on one side for a moment, and whispering in his ear these ironical words :

“ Well, my dear fellow, instead of dining together in Paris before your departure, here we are, and you will not perhaps get away so speedily.”

“ There is no change in my projects. Instead of leaving to-day, I shall start to-morrow, that is all,” answered Séverac, in a low tone; “ but not a word of what I told you yesterday, you understand.”

“ All right, my boy,” murmured the notary; “ I know what ought to be done, and if you go it will be because there is nothing else for you to do.”

“ The campaign was a severe one, then ? ” remarked La Liviniere to Séverac.

“ We had to undergo great hardships,” answered Pierre. “ The want of water caused us much suffering. In the desert the only strategy lies in seizing on wells and springs. He who holds these is master of the situation. The Arabs

have great advantages over us in this warfare; their sobriety is incredible, and their horses are like themselves. Men and beasts cover enormous distances without drinking, and almost without eating. Our soldiers are incapable of such abstinence, and die of want."

"Did you see those fellows pretty closely?" asked Pompéran.

"At a sword's length," said Pierre, smiling. "They are very brave."

"It is said that they mutilate their prisoners in a frightful fashion," observed Madame de Pompéran thoughtlessly. "It is very lucky that they did not get hold of you when you were wounded."

And as the men looked at one another laughing, she became very red, and leaning towards her husband, whose neck she kissed, asked:

"Did I say anything foolish?"

"Our troops carry on a similar war," said Mrs Smarden, "against the Redskins, who have been driven back into the forests and prairies of the West. Fighting is always going on on the frontiers. Three years ago I went with my husband from New York to San Francisco. There were soldiers in the train. We were not attacked though, and I was very disappointed. Mr Smarden is the best shot in Chicago, and he had a Winchester repeating rifle that he would have done wonders with; only he had forewarned me that in case the Indians seemed to be getting the best of it he should kill me before the fight was over. I was thus able to tell how much he loves me."

"Why did he want to kill you, my dear?" asked Madame de Pompéran, greatly astonished.

"Only, my dear, in order not to expose me to the risk of becoming the wife of a great chief with feathers stuck in his head and scalps hung round his waist."

"Perhaps they are charming in the intimate relations of life," suggested Frossard silyly.

"I can fancy you in the wigwam of a sachem, Madame Smarden," said Pompéran. "You would have managed to have had dresses sent from Worth, and to have arranged some little dances, eh?"

"Around the stake," added La Liviniere, laughing.

Séverac had withdrawn somewhat from the group. Blanche and Madeleine, standing by the stone balustrade, were silently watching the sun sinking behind the woods crowning the slopes of the park. His last rays touching the floating clouds tinged them with crimson; it seemed as though roses had been scattered over the sky. Blanche and Pierre remained silent, deeply moved, and enjoying the pleasure of finding themselves near to one another after such a long separation.

"It is a year, mademoiselle," said Séverac at length, in a tremulous voice, "since I had the happiness of seeing you for the last time. It was there," he continued, pointing to the walk running parallel with the road, "and I retained in my inmost being the remembrance of your kind farewell. I was very sad. I had just left my mother, and I said to myself that I should see no more friendly faces. I already felt myself cut off from all, and bound towards the unknown. It was then that I caught sight of you. It seemed to me that hope sprang afresh within me. I recovered courage; and without doubt you brought me back, since after having been so near death I am home here again."

The young girl listened to these words in delightful abstraction. She directed a look of angelic tenderness towards Pierre.

"You have been watched over, *sn*," she said, raising her eyes to heaven. "We prayed for you every day."

In two sentences they had made such progress in their mutual intimacy that they paused, the young girl feeling somewhat confused, the young officer finding himself led on with too great rapidity towards saying that which he ought not to utter. He returned to commonplaces which would allow him to continue this interview by rendering it harmless.

"Have you still my mare?" he asked of Blanche. "Are you satisfied with her?"

"She is lovely, and she follows me now as she used to follow you. I will show her to you to-morrow, if you like, and we can have a ride with the General."

Séverac's face at the word to-morrow became so overcast,

that Blanche, seized with uneasiness, could not help saying :

"You are going to stay some time at Bois-le-Roi, are you not ?"

"Some time, yes, mademoiselle," he answered, with a careless air, making a hypocritical use of this very elastic phrase.

But his feigned easiness of manner did not escape the instinctive suspicions of Mademoiselle de Cygne, who watched him attentively as Madeleine said maliciously to him :

"Your pretty mare has good legs, but she does not go much faster than you can."

"What do you mean, mademoiselle ? I do not understand you," answered Séverac, turning very red.

"Come, do not play at being mysterious," replied Madeleine, "but admit that it was you who the day before yesterday was prowling round us at our lunch. We will not tell anyone, your secret shall be well kept."

"If you will promise not to repeat it I will admit it," said Séverac, with some embarrassment "But who recognised me ?"

"My dog," answered Mademoiselle de Cygne quickly. "But why did you run away ?"

"Because I was not presentable. I had gone out in an old shooting blouse for a stroll. On proceeding through the forest I saw the Count's drag."

Frossard, by a clever flank movement, had escaped the Colonel's vigilant eye, and approached the young ladies. Mademoiselle de Cygne, with a gesture of amiable authority, signalled to him to follow her. Leading him a step or two aside, she said .

"You would do well not to come and talk with Madeleine in the evening Your footprints show on the flower-beds, and you have knocked down some pears. Monsieur Merlot, who has a keen eye, has discovered these traces of your expedition, and this morning had a painful scene with his daughter."

The young notary, who had no other way of talking for any length of time with her whom he loved than that of

coming beneath her window when everybody in the Chateau had retired to rest, was positively petrified.

Mademoiselle de Cygne took advantage of this to say to him :

"It seems that Monsieur Séverac is going to leave speedily."

"Yes, mademoiselle, to-morrow evening," said Frossard, in his abstraction.

But he had scarcely uttered these words than he realised the blunder he had made. Fearing that he had betrayed his friend he glanced suspiciously at Blanche.

"He told me so," said Mademoiselle de Cygne boldly, finding it necessary to reassure the indiscreet Frossard.

"Ah!" said the latter, thinking to himself that the firmest resolutions melt in the presence of a loved woman like wax beneath the sun.

And Blanche, with palpitating heart, not thinking of the falsehood she herself had just told, gave Séverac a reproachful look that troubled the young officer. She said to herself :

"He wishes to go away again. Why? If he goes, who knows whether this time we shall have the opportunity of seeing him return? My uncle must find a way of making him stay."

She sought the Count. He was walking up and down the terrace with Merlot, listening with occasional shrugs of his shoulders to the Colonel, who was speaking with great animation. The little hawklike head of the old soldier rose more briskly and more threatening than usual.

"You do not know what you are talking about," the General was saying. "You have seen footprints on a flower-bed under the wing in which your daughter and my niece are sleeping. Well, it must have been a gardener filling a rustic basket, or one of the gentlemen here gathering a rose."

"Fiddle-de-dee," said Merlot. "An old stager like me is not to be taught his business. The fellow has been walking along the espalier. He has brought down more than fifteen pears. Bergamots, the scoundrel!"

"Be easy, there are plenty more. But, my friend, do

me the favour not to shout so loud about it. Your tongue will wag in rather a compromising fashion. Above all do not repeat what you have just told me to everybody. In the first place you will get laughed at."

"Laughed at!" and the Colonel drew himself up grimly. "Laughed at!"

"Exactly so. Our young people are not very favourably inclined towards you. You have a way of watching over your daughter which is rather insulting to them. They are perfectly well-bred gentlemen. What is it you think would happen if you were not always at their elbows?"

"All right. I know how to behave myself."

"It does not look very much like it. When your daughter was at the convent you used to groan at the idea of her coming home to live with you some day. Now that she is with you, you growl at the idea of her marrying. Must I tell you, you are an atrabilious being with the spirit of contradiction carried to extremes. If I were your daughter I would leave you in the lurch and marry Frossard."

"Frossard!"

"Yes, Frossard, who is a good and worthy fellow, possessed of excellent health, and a very nice fortune. Oh, he does not come of an illustrious stock. I grant you that much. But you, yourself, are not a Montmorency."

"Reproach me with my origin."

"Bah! you old stupid. Come, I will satisfy you. This evening we will smoke a cigar and keep watch. And if Frossard really comes to play the guitar under your daughter's windows, we will pull his ears, although the poor fellow may in point of fact be driven to this act of extravagance by your gaoler-like ways. Now not a word, you understand, to anyone, or I'll let you unravel it all by yourself."

Blanche approached. Merlot walked away grumbling. The hope of catching his pet aversion in the very act had cheered him up a little—provided that he came. The scoundrel was capable of suspecting something and not coming. Merlot resolved to appear meek and mild, the better to deceive Frossard, and humming a tune, he walked in his direction.

"Well, uncle, was Monsieur Merlot still unfolding his

griefs to you?" asked Mademoiselle de Cygne, hesitating to speak at once of that which occupied her mind.

"As usual. It is too old a habit of his for him to lose it now. But we will all league together against him, and he will be obliged to consent to give Madeleine to Frossard. And when your friend is married, it will be as well for you to decide in your turn."

"Oh! I, uncle," said Mademoiselle de Cygne, "if you will allow it, will remain an old maid."

"I should like to see such a thing!" exclaimed the General. "Is it the young people who remain single nowadays, and the old ones who marry? Come, my pet, amongst all the young men whom you have met this winter is there not one who pleases you? You have been greatly sought after. But you are rather grave, dear?"

"I am a nun who has missed her vocation, you know," said Blanche, with a melancholy smile. "Perhaps one day I shall return to the convent."

"What a tone to say so in! Are you not happy? Have you any hidden sorrow?"

The Count gazed attentively at the young girl. Her head bent down, her eyes veiled by their long lashes, she leant on his arm with a pensive air. Since she had entered his dwelling he had seen her thus passing noiselessly, somewhat dreamy, rarely laughing, slender and fragile as a sickly flower. Her mother had been the same, and death had seized on her very quickly. A sudden uneasiness took possession of the good-hearted General. He adored this sweet and simple child, who surrounded him with delicate and loving little attentions which Sarah, more dazzling but less regardful, had never shown him. He shuddered at the idea that perhaps she already felt the attacks of a slow and merciless disease. Had the grief that had killed the Marchioness de Cygne stamped its pallor on Blanche's brow? She was capable of suffering proudly and silently. Did she love without acknowledging it? He sought to make her speak.

"You know, my dear child, that you can count upon me. I notice that you have been rather sad of late. Tell me your little troubles. I assure you that I can find a cure for

them. I will do everything to make you happy. Come, be frank. Tell me, is your heart quite untouched?"

"Do not worry yourself, uncle, on my account," answered Blanche. "If ever I have a secret to confide——"

She checked herself, not wishing to tell another falsehood, and seeing the General very attentive, she began to laugh.

"Well, then, I will marry, if that will give you pleasure. But not just yet. Who knows; perhaps I am waiting for a prince, as in the fairy tales?"

Then becoming serious again:

"Did you know, uncle, that Monsieur Séverac starts for Algeria again to-morrow?"

"What! to-morrow?" exclaimed the General, whose ideas at once flowed in another direction. "It is impossible. He has only just returned."

"It was Monsieur Frossard who told me a quarter of an hour since. Such a sudden departure will cause Madame Séverac a great deal of pain."

"But he is mad!" cried the General. "There is another whom I have not been able to make out at all for some time past. He was the most pleasant fellow, the easiest to get along with. All on a sudden he has become taciturn and crotchety. I must sift this matter out. There is something at the bottom of it all."

Not able to measure the effect of the words she had uttered, not suspecting the gravity of the position in which she had placed Séverac, Blanche let go her uncle's arm, satisfied with having prepared obstacles to the departure of him whom she loved.

The dinner-bell drew all the guests towards the terrace. Night was coming on, and through the widely-opened windows the lighted-up rooms glittered brightly. The Count, somewhat preoccupied, approached Sarah, who was chatting gaily with La Liviniere, and drawing her on one side for a moment, said:

"Can you understand it, my dear? It seems that Séverac's visit is a farewell one. He means to start again for Africa to-morrow, if I am to believe what I am told."

Fortunately the deep shadow that enwrapped the terrace hid the violent agitation displayed by his wife from the

Count. An inward thrill shook her ; there was a sound as of bells in her ears ; her eyelids quivered, and an intolerable burning pang shot through her breast, to which she carried her hand as though she sought to push a red-hot iron aside.

"I was just now saying that the lad's attitude is inexplicable."

"Inexplicable, indeed," repeated Sarah, like a mournful echo

"But I mean to speak to him after we have dined. I will keep you informed of what then takes place. Here is Merlot come to take you in to dinner."

The Count offered his arm to Mrs Smarden, and the guests slowly ascended the stone steps in couples and entered the magnificent rooms, the lively glitter and resplendent illumination of which formed a charming contrast to the dark silence of the terrace. Sarah had had time to recover herself. On taking her seat she glanced round, and saw Séverac placed between Blanche and Madeleine. She cast towards him an imperious and threatening look, the significance of which the young officer did not understand. He thought his secret well kept. And already Frossard, the Machiavelian framer of plans, who dreamt of triumphing over all difficulties and assuring at the same time his own happiness and his friend's, had betrayed it.

During the whole of the first part of the dinner conversation languished. The Count alone was able, with the superficial grace of a man of the world, to fulfil his duties as master of the house. Sarah, despite the efforts she made to appear free from all preoccupation, was deeply engrossed with the harrowing thought of Séverac's treachery. The more attentively she examined his conduct the more its duplicity was revealed to her. He had the fixed intention of lulling her into a false security in order to steal away at leisure. Save for her visit to Bois-le-Roi, as she now understood, he would not have even called on her. She quivered with anger at seeing herself so shamefully deceived. Her form was reflected in a large Venetian glass with a frame of delicately-carved flowers placed in front of her. She looked at herself with bitterness Was she

not beautiful enough? What was needed to overcome Séverac's insulting coolness? She turned her glance towards the young officer. He was hanging down his head with a sad air, without speaking. She was able to study him at leisure. He had grown very brown beneath the sun of Africa. Against his bronzed complexion his long moustaches stood out boldly. His forehead, sheltered by the peak of his cap, had remained white, and his closely-cropped black hair heightened its ivory-like tone. She thought his mien more manly and bolder than before his departure. He greatly pleased her thus. And little by little, in the contemplation of him whom she loved, she again had the passionate wish to find herself alone with him. Her cheeks reddened, her eyes sparkled. And seized with the desire to dazzle, she began to talk with a sudden animation that charmed everyone.

In a moment she concentrated the general attention upon herself, and Séverac, in order not to run the risk of being remarked, had to take part in the conversation. He could not escape the charm which emanated from Sarah. The powerful magnetism that she spread around her penetrated him invincibly. She possessed him once again by her magic grace. Seeing the efforts Sarah was making to please him, he understood that her love, far from having been weakened by distance, had only increased. He experienced a moment of despair at the thought of the tortures he was about to inflict upon this adorable creature, whose only error was having loved too well.

The atmosphere of the dining-room, heated by the lights of the candelabra, and laden with the perfume of the flowers, seemed stifling to him. Happily the dinner drew to a close. The sedate footmen, with solemn slowness, threw open the doors leading to the drawing-room. The guests rose with cheerful tumult, and the large table, glittering with crystal and silver, and laden with glasses in which the rubies of Bordeaux and the topazes of Champagne still sparkled, remained abandoned in its sumptuous disorder. Some of the guests, risking the night dews, had strolled on to the terrace.

At the end of the drawing-room was a conservatory,

furnished with charming luxury. Gilt trellises afforded support to climbing plants. From the centre was suspended a chandelier in iron-wood, carved by clever and patient Chinese hands, and the centre of which was open, so as to form a jardiniere, whence hung clusters of flowers and foliage. Marble statues gleamed in their delicate whiteness amidst clumps of palms. Immense terra cotta vases, masterpieces modelled by Clodion, ornamented the four corners of the apartment, in which arm-chairs and couches, with lacquered frames picked out with green, offered their well-padded backs as comfortable resting-places to dreamers. A staircase of carved wood led to the library, situate in the wing inhabited by Mademoiselle de Cygne and her friend, Madeleine. This conservatory was a retired spot, to which the General willingly came to take his siesta. Broad-plaited blinds of crimson silk hanging in front of the glass tempered the rays of the sun. The mosaic pavement maintained an exquisite coolness. Here, far from all intruders, and able to escape in case of necessity, by the door opening on to the park, the General was certain of peaceful slumbers. In the evening coffee was served here with cigars.

It was there, around a small table provided with a well-furnished liqueur stand, that the Colonel, Pompéran, La Liviniere, Séverac, and Frossard were chatting and sipping kummel or chartreuse, whilst a young officer of the hussars was playing a waltz in the drawing-room. The conversation had naturally turned on the war, and Merlot, who for several moments had been shaking his head, now flushed by difficult digestion, exclaimed, with irony :

“Astonishing, these young fellows ! An officer playing on the piano ! In my time we only played on the five-foot clarionet” ; the military slang for a musket.

A universal protest followed the Colonel's remark.

“Colonel, do you believe that because Captain Adhémar is strumming quadrilles and waltzes for the ladies to dance to he is not an excellent officer ?” rejoined Pompéran, who after a good dinner was particularly lively. “Ah ! Colonel, I have verified with grief that you are malevolent. Yes, I have remarked with pain that you speak ill of everyone.

I know very well that you are perfection yourself, Colonel, which gives you the right to be severe on others. But you abuse it, and that saddens me. On my word of honour you rend my heart, Colonel.

"Pooh, pooh, pooh! I know what I am saying," growled Merlot. "The officers of to-day are not up to those of past times. And the army, sir, the army; do you think that they fought during the last war?"

"What else did they do then?" asked Frossard impudently.

The Colonel's neck swelled and seemed about to burst. Frossard made a movement as though to flee, but Merlot with a triumphant gesture seized him by a button.

"Maitre Frossard is about to speak. The notary is well versed in military matters. Listen to this chamber strategist. Listen to this tactician in slippers."

"But, Colonel, I have seen service," risked Frossard, with timidity.

"Seen service! Where? In what? When?" exclaimed Merlot, raising his voice a note at each question.

"In the Garde Mobile, at Paris, during the siege."

"In the Garde Mobile at Paris?" thundered the Colonel.

"Then it's you who brought about the 4th of September?"

And withering Frossard with a gesture, Merlot seemed to accuse him of having brought about the Revolution and overthrown the Empire single-handed.

The young notary raised his hand to heaven, full of discouragement. He looked so little like a man capable of mixing up in an outbreak, that all the spectators began to laugh.

"Oh, oh! Frossard," exclaimed La Liviniere gaily, "you never told us that you were a demolisher of thrones, a drinker of blood. Who knows, gentlemen; he was perhaps a member of the Commune."

"Oh! gentlemen, my part during the siege was limited to standing sentry in the trenches with snow up to my knees in front of Montrouge, and I can assure you that it was not warm. At the end they led us to Montrouge. We marched to the assault on the park of Buzenval. Ah! there, for instance, it was another matter; it was warm. I fired a number of shots, we lost a lot of men, and I received three bullets——"

"Three bullets?" interrupted Pompéran.

"Yes, three bullets," replied Frossard proudly, "two in my coat and one in my cap."

"You should have received them in your head, sir," said Merlot spitefully.

"Much obliged, Colonel," answered the young notary; "that will be for next time."

The group opened. The Count entered the conservatory, from the drawing-room.

"Come, gentlemen," he said, "the ladies are waiting for you, and Captain Adhémar, with his usual kindness, is at the piano."

They passed into the drawing-room. With a gesture the Count checked Pierre, and pointing to a chair:

"Come, my dear fellow, let us have a little talk," he said affectionately. "Because you are no longer under me, there is no reason why I should not inquire what is becoming of you? It is a year since you left me. What are your intentions for the future?"

"But, General, I shall return to my post."

"And if I found a means of keeping you in France? You have gone through a campaign, you have been seriously wounded, you have every right to an easier service. General Montaigut, my old chief of the staff, will take you if you like; I am certain."

There was a brief silence. The young officer's heart beat violently. The struggle he had foreseen was beginning. He would have to defend himself not only against the wife, but against the husband.

"General, I am deeply grateful," said Séverac firmly, "but I cannot accept the offer you make me."

"Why not?" asked the Count.

"Because, General, I have only been too much favoured up till now, and I do not think I have yet justified the favours that have been granted me. I wish to continue on active service."

The Count and Séverac looked at one another. Before the old man's firm glance the eyes of the young one fell.

"And then I like Africa," continued Pierre. "You know, General—you, who are an old African—that the free life

of the colony, in which the soldier is sovereign lord, has a powerful attraction. And then it is very warm there; I am a chilly subject, and winter is coming on. There you have—is it not so?—more reasons than are necessary to explain my resolution.”

“My dear fellow, your reasons are mere evasions,” said the Count. “Why, in any case, did you settle to start to-morrow?”

Pierre became very red, and made a gesture of surprise. How had the Count become aware of his project? If Monsieur de Canalheilles was so well informed, Sarah must be so likewise. It was she who had sent her husband forward to commence the attack.

“General, who told you?” he stammered.

“What does that matter to you? I know, that is enough. Come, Séverac, be frank. For a long time past you have put on melodramatic airs. Confess that there is a lady in the case. Come, a year ago she left for Algeria? You wanted to go and find her? And now that you have seen your mother you are fidgeting to return to your charmer, eh? Have I guessed it?”

“General, I swear to you——”

“Eh! my dear fellow, it is the way with youth. In my time I was just the same. Ah! I would willingly swap my three stars for your four stripes to have the right of blushing as you have been doing. Then it is settled; you want to go back?”

“Yes, General, I ought to; I must,” said the young man gravely. “And believe me that I have reasons for refusing the proposals you have made to me which, although not those you imagine, are not less serious.”

“Let it be as you wish then. We shall see you start off again with great pain, the Countess and myself. We feel a very strong friendship for you.”

“General,” began Pierre. But his voice died away in his throat, and he remained before Monsieur de Canalheilles without speaking, and with his eyes full of tears.

“There, now he is going to break down,” exclaimed the Count, touched himself by the young man’s emotion. “Come, my dear fellow.”

"Forgive me, General," said Pierre, "your words, so full of kindness, have deeply moved me." He paused. Then with gloomy energy he added: "Ah! believe me, that the day when I could pay my debt by giving my life for you would be a welcome one."

"Come, my lad, come, come."

Frossard, who felt uneasy, thrust his head through the curtains of the drawing-room door, and seeing the pair affectionately clasp one another's hands came in. The Count and Pierre approached him in silence. Monsieur de Canalheilles, greatly preoccupied, pushed Frossard into a corner, and pointing to Séverac, who sat down absorbed in thought, near the fireplace:

"He distresses me," he said. "He's not right, that lad. I should not be astonished if he were on the point of committing some foolish act. He must have some unfortunate love affair on his mind. Has he never confided anything of the kind to you, who are his intimate friend? No? Well, then, question him adroitly; there is more confidence between young people. Try and get a clue to the enigma—and tell it me."

The notary looked at Monsieur de Canalheilles with such amazement that the latter said:

"What is the matter with you? Oh, you know more about it than you want to make out. Frossard, in Séverac's interest I beg of you to tell me everything in detail."

"I know nothing, Count," exclaimed the young man. "It was your suppositions that caused my astonishment."

And Frossard said to himself, "Tell him everything—and in detail, too!"

The waltz was drawing to its close. Sarah, slightly flushed, and a little out of breath, with her lips parted smilingly, in order to breathe more freely, came in on La Liviniere's arm, in a short white dress, beneath the hem of which appeared her little feet in bronze kid shoes. She advanced in so marked a fashion towards Séverac that he, completely upset, and wishing at any cost to avoid an interview, rose ceremoniously as though to offer her his seat, and turned towards the window opening on to the terrace. There were Blanche and Madeleine. As though

attracted by some irresistible magnet, Pierre, in spite of himself, drew near to the young girl.

Outside a delightful coolness prevailed. The night was mild and clear. Countless stars glittered in the dark sky. Pierre recalled that whilst camping out when slumber quitted his eyelids he had made choice of a star, and addressed to it mute invocations. He would fancy that Blanche was perhaps looking at it at the same time as himself, and that their thoughts might meet in this contemplation. He sought to discover this star, but failed to recognise it. It no longer illumined the gloomy vault of heaven Séverac sadly lowered his eyes. It seemed to him that a mysterious tie had been broken between Blanche and himself.

At the same moment the soft voice of the young girl fell on his ear.

"You are going away again, Monsieur Séverac, I have heard. Your stay has been short."

Pierre bowed without replying. Blanche sighed. Words rose to her lips that she dared not utter. Madeleine, less fettered, came to her aid.

"Be more careful of yourself," she said; "the Count and my father say that you are somewhat of a—what did they say?—a dare-devil. Forgive me, but to a soldier as brave as yourself one may recommend a little prudence. You have a mother, Monsieur Séverac, and friends. Take care of yourself on their account."

The young man bowed his head. Never had he felt his heart so wrung. He had only to say one word—he understood it perfectly—for Blanche to be his. The touching recommendation that he had just heard from Madeleine was addressed to him by Mademoiselle de Cygne through the voice of her friend. Happiness such as he had dreamed of—calm, deep, sweet and somewhat solemn—was there within his reach. And he must turn away from it and depart. He had not even the right to speak, to open his heart, to show its bleeding wounds, and to cause this charming girl to understand that if he did not divine love in her timid words and surprise it in her pure looks, it was because he was bound to be deaf and blind. He would have liked to have rolled at her feet, to have torn his breast

with his hands, to suffer physically as much as he suffered morally—any new pain to make the old one seem less cruel. And in his madness he wished for an infernal power to plunge all that surrounded him into an abyss. He had a vision of destruction from which he would rescue Blanche, and bear her away trembling and distracted upon his breast. He groaned inwardly, and exhibited to the two young girls a face so convulsed by grief that they could not hide their alarm.

"What is the matter with you?" asked Blanche, in trembling tones.

"Nothing, mademoiselle," answered Pierre in a hollow voice.

And fearing to be guilty of some irreparable act of imprudence, he sought to retire.

"Farewell, mademoiselle," said he. "Perhaps some time will elapse ere I return to France. Who knows what changes may take place during my absence? It is probable that you will be married. I trust from the bottom of my heart that you will be happy."

Pierre uttered these words with impressive softness. He seemed to say to the young girl: "Forget me, and become another's."

It was an act of supreme loyalty on his part. He sought to make Mademoiselle de Cygne understand that she must not wait for him, and that an insurmountable obstacle reared itself between them. Blanche read in Pierre's eyes the anguish caused by this sacrifice. She felt chilled to the marrow, bowed her head, and taking her friend's arm, fled in order to keep her tears from being seen.

Pierre followed her for a moment with his eyes, and resolutely advancing towards the Countess, prepared to bid her farewell. He did not want to remain another moment at Canalheilles. He made a sign to Frossard to follow him.

"Do you leave us already?" asked Sarah with admirable coolness. "I have a commission to entrust to you for your mother."

And without any appearance of affectation she drew Pierre a little away from his friend in front of the fireplace, and there holding him isolated beneath the potency of her glance:

"You are trying to deceive me," she said, in a tone that made Pierre shudder. "You wanted to leave to-morrow without seeing me again. Well, I forbid it."

"Madame," murmured the young man, "my departure is fixed for to-morrow. Grave interests are dependent on it as regards myself."

"No matter, you will put it off."

They looked at one another like two duellists who have crossed swords, and who measure each other with their eyes before commencing the final struggle. Pierre saw Sarah pale but impassible. She smiled. Only at the corners of her mouth a nervous twitching fluttered about her lips.

"That which you ask cannot be," he said.

Two flashes shot from Sarah's eyes. She turned pale. Her fingers clenched with such force that their joints cracked.

"Take care," she said, with a vehemence that she already could no longer check. "If you do not obey me I will seek you within an hour at home, in the very house of your mother."

She drew breath with an effort, recovered a little of her calmness, and softening the expression of her face, which had become terrible, said:

"Go Go to the end of the park, and when you see all the lights extinguished return here to the conservatory. I will join you here."

Pierre hesitated for a moment. He summed up the perils of this enterprise, and weighed them against the threats Sarah had just levelled at him. He knew she was a woman who would carry them into effect. He understood that he had yet a last contest to wage. He accepted it.

"Very well, I will go."

Frossard had watched the brief interview between Sarah and Pierre from a distance. Forewarned, he understood the hidden threats; he divined the violence concealed beneath the smiles. He admired Séverac's firm bearing. He watched his calculated submission. And when after having taken leave the young officer went out, he darted after him.

They both strode along for some moments without

speaking, when Séverac, turning to his friend, who was walking beside him bareheaded, said, abruptly :

“Good-night, Frossard. To-morrow I will dine with you as we settled.”

“Very good,” said the notary ; “but meanwhile I do not leave you. Oh ! whatever you like except that,” he continued, in answer to an impatient gesture from Pierre ; “the time for trifling has gone by. Do you believe that I am not acquainted with your secret ? Madame de Canalheilles will probably be awaiting you in a little time, and you will return. Don’t tell me no. I am sure of it I will accompany you. Where you go I will go. If you have a rendezvous I will keep watch. One does not abandon a friend in a situation as serious as yours. Oh ! I will supply prudence on your part, for the Count’s anger would be terrible. He is capable of killing you if he finds you with his wife. Come, Séverac, can you under any reasonable pretext return home and avoid this rendezvous ?”

Pierre shook his head.

“Well ! Happen what may, we shall be together, and I will keep the door with the fidelity of a janissary. Let us go to the summer-house at the end of the park, there will be less chance of our being seen, and we can pass away the hour we still have to spare”

And the two friends silently crossed the park beneath the tall trees of the dark avenues, to give time for the inmates of the Chateau to fall asleep, for the lights to be extinguished, and for Sarah to descend to the conservatory.

CHAPTER XVI

As soon as Séverac had left, the guests of the Chateau retired. The Count made a sign to Merlot, and went out on to the terrace. It was eleven o’clock. The moon, clearing the trees as it rose in the heavens, shed its soft light on the lawns, above which floated a gauzelike mist.

“I am going to prove to you,” said the Count, lighting a cigar, “that you are a perfect visionary.”

"And I am going to prove that you are completely blind," replied Merlot. "Only let us get into the shade. We could be seen five hundred yards off in this moonlight. A fine time for poaching, eh! There will be more than one deer brought down on the outskirts of the forest to-night."

The Count and Merlot reached a clump of trees, and seated themselves quietly beneath its shade to wait. The Colonel, solely preoccupied about his daughter, had, fortunately for Séverac, led the Count in the opposite direction to the conservatory. With his eyes fixed on the espalier along which the unknown prowler had passed the night before, he watched, chewing the end of his cigar and emitting the smoke in rapid puffs.

In the drawing-room Mademoiselle de Cygne and Madeleine remained alone with Sarah. A prey to violent agitation, the Countess wandered to and fro, delaying the moment of retiring. They entered the conservatory, now lit by a single lamp. Mademoiselle de Cygne's maid, descending the carved wood staircase which led to the young girl's room through the library, asked if there were any orders. Blanche dismissed her, and seated in an arm-chair, did not seem to think of retiring.

Sarah, grown impatient, leant against the back of the chair, and fixing her restless eyes on Mademoiselle de Cygne, said:

"What is the matter, Blanche? You don't say anything."

Mademoiselle de Cygne started, and, aroused from her far-off dream, answered abstractedly:

"I was listening to you. I am rather tired."

"Well, we must go to bed," said Sarah. "Good-night, dears."

She paused, and turning towards Madeleine:

"Tell me, dear, does the gardener make much noise in watering the plants in the conservatory in the morning? If so, he could be told to do it later."

"Thanks, madame," answered the young girl, "one can hear nothing from our rooms. And then, it is being in the open air, I suppose, but I do sleep so soundly. I believe you might fire off a cannon in the park without waking me."

Sarah did not want to learn anything more. Nothing could be heard from the young girls' rooms, that was the essential point.

"Do not be disturbed if you hear a noise by-and-by," she remarked; "I want to bring back some books to the library, and choose some others. Good-night."

She went out through the drawing-room. Madeleine took up the lamp, and addressing Blanche:

"Are you coming up?" she asked.

"In a moment," replied Mademoiselle de Cygne in a low voice. "You can take the lamp," she added, on noticing her friend make a movement as though to replace it on the table; "it is bright as day."

Madeleine glanced sorrowfully at Blanche, motionless in her arm-chair, with her hands dangling, lost in mournful thoughts. Respecting her friend's silence, she withdrew, ascended the ten steps of the staircase, and opening a door disappeared.

Blanche remained alone in the silvery light which flooded the conservatory, giving to the marble statues rising amidst the clusters of shrubs the appearance of graceful phantoms. She thought that this time it was all over; a secret presentiment warned her that if Pierre left she would never see him again. When he had spoken to her so softly there had been, as it were, an eternal farewell in his words—"You will be married. I trust from the bottom of my heart that you will be happy." Happy. Could she be happy without him? And he, what would be his life without her? He loved her, she felt certain. Everything proved it; his sadness, and the involuntary bitterness of his wishes for her happiness. And he was going away. Why? She had been seeking for a couple of hours to solve this question without success. What weighty reason could turn him aside from her? What strange motive hindered him from speaking? She only saw one, difference of fortune. She was too rich. In his delicacy Pierre would not appear to marry a woman for money. She cursed the money that her father had amassed with such greedy joy. That wealth, to the augmentation of which the miser had sacrificed everything—his wife's life, his

daughter's affection, his own dignity—she would have liked in a moment to have been able to scatter far from her, in order to present herself to him whom she loved, and by whom she felt herself beloved, saying, "Behold me as poor as yourself now, take me." But meanwhile he was going away. She followed him in thought on the road to Bois-le-Roi. She saw the little house, surrounded by its modest garden with its peaceful shades. She had often dreamed of happiness under this humble roof. She had said to herself that she would enter this dwelling on his arm, and that his mother should welcome her as a well-beloved daughter. Since he drew back in presence of her fortune, she would go forward to meet him in his poverty. She was a coward for not having spoken out when her uncle questioned her. A little frankness, and the Count would have hindered Pierre from going.

But was there not still time? That which she had not dared do to-day she could do the next morning. She would seek her uncle the very first thing, confess the truth to him, and beg him to make to Séverac those advances which the latter was too proud to make himself.

Comforted by the thought that she need not give up all hope, she rose and took several steps in the conservatory, lighted only from above, and on the pavement of which her shadow stretched to an immense length. She went towards one of the windows, and raising the blind, opened it. A deep calm reigned over all. She leant against the window-sill listening to the frogs croaking on the margin of the ornamental water. Her glance rested on the clumps of trees of the park, now gloomy and mysterious looking. Suddenly, in the avenue leading towards the flower garden, she thought she caught sight of two shadowy figures. She was more puzzled than alarmed. She silently closed the window, and watched the movements of the two night prowlers through the glass panes.

They advanced cautiously, following the line of the trees. Arrived at a distance of about fifty yards from the Chateau they had to cross an open space. With terrible emotion Blanche recognised Pierre and Frossard. Her breathing grew oppressed, a cold perspiration broke out over her

forehead, her thoughts whirled in confusion through her brain with incredible swiftness. What was the young officer doing there at night at such a time? She did not for a moment think of finding a befitting reason for his coming. A presentiment of misfortune had suddenly struck her. She remained close to the window pane, the coolness of which refreshed her burning brow. With her handkerchief she wiped away the steam of her breath. She watched.

Pierre had quitted Frossard, who remained under the trees, and was advancing slowly towards the conservatory. Blanche shuddered at the thought of finding herself face to face with him, at having to question, to accuse him. She wished to go away, to know nothing; and already she had made a step towards the staircase, ready to ascend it in a second, when a hand cautiously turned the handle of the drawing-room door, and the rustling of a dress caught her ear. A horrible thought, which she had not time to fathom, completed Blanche's mental confusion; it was the Countess coming in by one door, whilst Pierre was advancing to the other. The young girl felt so sick at heart that she was on the point of crying aloud. But she made an effort of will, and from that moment, as eager to know all as she had been an instant before to ignore all, pale as death beneath the moon's rays, she softly pushed aside the branches of one of the clusters of shrubs and disappeared behind their green curtain.

It was time. Sarah entered silently, and without a light. She looked round, saw that she was alone, shot the bolt of the door communicating with the drawing-room, and advanced to that leading to the garden. In the silence the rapid beating of Blanche's heart might have been heard. Pierre entered.

"A light might have betrayed us," said Sarah. "Give me your hand. I will guide you."

She held out her hand towards him, ready to lead him tenderly. He remained motionless; his hand did not touch hers.

"It is needless," he said; "I can see very well. Besides, I shall only stay a moment."

Sarah's brows contracted, and in a cutting tone of voice, such as Blanche had never before heard, she retorted :

"You will stay as long as is needed to hear all that I have to say to you."

"You have a way of asking," said Pierre bitterly, "that admits of no resistance."

"And you a way of answering that irritates and wounds."

She went and sat down at two paces from Séverac, who remained standing, and added very quietly :

"I did not bring you back from Algeria in order that you should go away again without my being able to see you."

"So then it was you ?" escaped from Pierre.

Sarah looked at him with superb audacity, and shaking her head, said :

"Did you by chance think that it wasn't ?"

Then, by one of those sudden impulses of her changeable nature, which rendered her so formidable, making herself as caressing and kind as she had been haughty and harsh, she went on :

"But what is the meaning of this revolt against everything that I wish ?"

She had taken his hand and drew him towards her. He had to sink on to a low stool in order not to seem to struggle with a woman, and found himself almost at Sarah's feet. She fixed upon him her large eyes, which in the obscurity appeared black, and her lips advanced towards his with an intoxicating smile. The memory of past pleasures stirred Pierre. A rush of blood rose to his temples, which throbbed violently. The palms of his hands clasped in those of Sarah became as burning as heated iron. He felt a devouring breath sweep across his face. A dizziness seized him. In a gleam of reason he saw himself lost, fallen again into the power of the enchantress. He freed himself suddenly, and fortifying his will, mastering his sentiments, he gazed boldly at his tyrannical mistress.

For an instant she had thought that she had recovered possession of him. His momentary weakness had not escaped her. With extreme cleverness she became mild and cajoling, in order not to alarm him and strengthen him in his resistance.

"Come, Pierre," she said, "we are alone, everyone is asleep; you have nothing to fear, do not draw away from me."

Séverac, instead of approaching, drew back, listening. Amidst the profound silence it had seemed to him that a low sob had escaped from some unseen witness of their interview.

"Did you not hear something?" asked he.

"Nothing. Who do you think could be here?" answered Sarah ironically. "You have grown very timorous."

He sought to fathom every corner of the conservatory with his looks. In the soft moonlight the marble gods smiled silently from their clumps of foliage. A funereal twilight prevailed, lending a poignant sadness to this glacial rendezvous, in which the lovers kept at a distance from each other. Behind her leafy screen, Blanche, with a trembling hand pressed to her heart, had listened to words each one of which had been a horrible revelation to her. She had not quite understood it all at first. Séverac's mien was so cold, that of the Countess so threatening, that she had thought she was present at an interview between two enemies. But Sarah had drawn near; she had spoken, and doubt was no longer possible. Pierre was Sarah's lover. He whom Blanche had chosen as the ideal type of honour had been so knavish and so disloyal. He with whom she had dreamt of sharing her life was not free. For she understood he was bound to the jealous Sarah. And the latter imperatively claimed her rights. She had paid dearly enough for them to desire to cling to them. Before the young girl's eyes rose the proud, grave face of the Count. How, when beloved by such a man, could Sarah have deceived him? How could she have forgotten his kindness, abused his confidence, and dishonoured him? And he, Pierre, treated like a son by the old man—he had disregarded everything—favours bestowed, constant protection, and warm, vigilant affection in evil days. The sin was without excuses. Pierre in a moment had lowered himself in Blanche's eyes. The idol that she had reared had fallen and crushed her heart.

She wished to go away and hear no more. She suffered

twice over in her lost love and her insulted modesty. Sarah's looks and smiles made her blush. When Sarah had drawn Séverac towards her, Blanche had shuddered. She experienced a momentary joy at seeing Pierre avoid her caresses. He no longer felt any love. Blanche divined this. He had no longer even any esteem. There was in his voice, as it were, a tone of hatred against this woman, who was seeking to constrain him to perpetuate a sin when he wished so much to atone for it, were it at the price of his life.

She listened with stupefaction to these two beings struggling in their guilty bonds, hurting themselves cruelly, the one in striving to knot them more tightly, the other in trying to break them. And she thought "This then is guilty love. And it is to attain this mistrust, this hatred, these shameful supplications, these horrible resistances, that one forgets everything—respect for others and of oneself. What atrocious mockery!"

"Why have you refused the Count's offers?" asked Sarah. "Why are you gloomy, sad, and desperate? You said farewell like a man resolved never to return. I will not have you go. I yielded once, and I have bitterly regretted it. If you but knew what I suffered during that year of absence. I was mortally sad, and I had to feign and smile. I was without news of you; I heard that an engagement had taken place; I thought that you might be wounded, dying. My fears, alas! were only too well founded. And I went to balls, decked out, affecting gaiety, playing the most frightful of comedies, and when I was alone, not daring to weep lest the traces of my tears should be noticed. And you speak to me of leaving again. You want to have me undergo this frightful torture once more. But if you on your part are the most indifferent of men, I, unhappy wretch that I am, love you. Come, listen to me. You know that for me there is only you in the world. What will become of me if you leave me? I have neither reason nor judgment; I only hearken to my heart: do not drive me to commit some folly."

She had seized him again. Standing with her head resting on Pierre's shoulder, she encircled him with her arms, seeking

to weaken his will, and in tones full of a caressing charm, repeated, as she brushed his neck with her lips :

"You will not leave me? Tell me that you will not go?"

"Sarah," exclaimed Pierre, in a hollow voice, striving to free himself :

"Ah ! you call me Sarah," cried she, with joyous triumph. "It is the first time since you have been here. I have moved you. You will not go ! Swear to me that you will not go."

Pierre gazed at her sadly, and then in a low voice said :

"I must."

"I forbid you," exclaimed Sarah furiously.

"I shall be obliged to disobey you."

Sarah's arms unloosed themselves from Séverac's neck as though broken. She sank on to a couch, and with gloomy brow and compressed lips, said :

"You hate me then?"

"No. You know I do not," answered Pierre mildly.

Tears flowed from Sarah's eyes, and in a broken voice she resumed :

"Then for pity's sake do not go away. I will do what you wish. I will be obedient. We will not love one another any more if that displeases you. But at least do not torture me."

She was on her knees ; she had taken Séverac's hand, and was pressing it to her breast, imploring him with her eyes as though life or death for her hung on his answer. She saw him hesitating. She trembled at the thought that he might answer "No."

With the cowardice of true love she proffered a concession.

"At least give me a few days, that I may have time to accustom myself to the thought of seeing you no more. I believed so firmly that you would stay. You see that I am doing everything to satisfy you. Grant me at least this favour. Will you?"

Pierre knew Sarah. He dreaded a return of violence on her part. He knew that if he drove her to extremities she was capable of committing some dangerous act of extravagance. He felt the necessity of giving way.

"Very well," he said, "I will stay a week."

With a bound Sarah was in Pierre's arms. She clasped him passionately in a transport of delirious joy. For this despairing creature a week's respite was Eternity. And then within herself she looked for some incident to favourably modify the situation. She reckoned on chance.

"Oh! you still love me," she exclaimed passionately. "My remembrance, in spite of all, lives in your heart, Pierre."

She clung to him, pressing against him, rubbing her face against his very garments. He repulsed her. She clasped her hands sadly.

"Forgive me, I am mad I have vexed you. How wretched I am. I who wish so much to please you."

"You have not vexed me," said he coldly.

She returned, and looking at him with adoration, said:

"Tell me that you do not love another woman?"

Blanche shuddered in her hiding-place. She waited for Pierre's answer with horrible anxiety. He turned away his eyes and cruelly let fall these words.

"I love your husband, that is all."

Sarah paled and uttered a cry of rebellion.

"You are too hard upon me, Pierre," said she. "Perhaps I have deserved that you should leave me, but not that you should insult me."

He made a movement as though to withdraw. She again became gentle and smiling.

"I am wrong to complain," she continued, with tender humility. "Tell me all that you want. But stay a little longer. At the price of any suffering I shall never think the happiness of seeing you near me too dearly purchased."

"I must leave you, however," answered Pierre. "Pardon me, I have been here more than half-an-hour. Your absence might be noticed. We must bid one another farewell."

"I will prove to you how obedient I am. Farewell then. But only until to-morrow."

"Very well, until to-morrow."

She drew near, raising herself on tiptoe to place her face within reach of Séverac's lips. He scarcely touched her forehead, and walking to the door of the drawing-room, by

which Sarah had arrived, sought to open it. It resisted his efforts. He gave it a violent push. The wood cracked, but the lock remained fast.

"What is it?" asked Sarah, not understanding what was taking place.

"The door has been fastened."

"By whom?"

They looked at one another in silence, not daring to answer, so greatly did they fear being obliged to admit the frightful reality. Sarah flitting across the conservatory like a white phantom advanced to the door leading to the garden. The moon, now sunk behind the roof of the Chateau, no longer lit up the flower-beds. She leant her forehead against the glass, then drew back, stifling a cry.

"Someone is there, near the avenue, motionless, as though on the watch," she murmured affrightedly.

Pierre thought at once of Frossard. He came to the door and looked out, trying to recognise his friend in the darkness. The watcher's back was to the conservatory, but he was much shorter than Frossard. Time seemed to be passing slowly for him. He stamped his foot impatiently. At length he turned round, and Pierre with uneasiness recognised Merlot.

"It is the Colonel," said he.

"They know I am here," murmured Sarah. "I am lost."

She sat down, seeking in her perturbed mind the means of escaping from the perilous position in which she found herself. She rose suddenly, uttering a cry of joy.

"I can pass through Blanche's room," she exclaimed.

She stepped towards the staircase, but Pierre caught her by the arm, his eyes sparkling, his face aglow.

"Can you think of such a thing?" exclaimed he. "What explanation can you give her? What will she think?"

"What does it matter?" she asked

Pierre resumed with increased animation:

"She will know that you were here. With me. Ah! not that. I will not have it."

In Séverac's eyes all the gravity of their position had vanished. The one important thing to him was that

Mademoiselle de Cygne should not know the horrible truth. At the thought that he might be condemned by the young girl, Pierre felt prepared to brave anything in order to avoid this shame. He would have faced the Count. Anything appeared bearable to him except Blanche's contempt.

"You would rather that I were lost then?" said Sarah.

"You would prefer us to be found here together?"

"No, I will go out. You will follow me. I will occupy the Colonel long enough for you to get away. That done, I shall very well manage to escape from him in turn."

"And if he is armed?" said Sarah, in terror.

"God grant that he may be!" exclaimed Séverac.

"Pierre!"

"Let me have my way. Stop here and wait."

He had opened the door leading to the garden. Merlot hearing a noise darted forward. But yet more promptly Frossard, who had been for some time past hiding behind an angle of the wall, trembling lest he should be seen by Merlot, seeking to warn Séverac of his danger, and unable to do so without precipitating that very danger, had reached the conservatory. He entered and grasped Séverac's arm, whispering:

"It is I."

Then with singular energy, oblivious of all respect, and casting aside all weakness, he seized the Colonel round the waist, seeking to remove him from their path. The impetuous Colonel, feeling himself violently dragged away by the young man, gave vent to cries of fury, and clutched hold of the door-jambs with incredible strength. He blocked the doorway with his short and struggling figure, distributing with excessive liberality a series of kicks about the legs of the unknown who was holding him so vigorously, and calling for help in a voice fortunately muffled by the efforts caused by the struggle.

"Ah, rascal!" roared Merlot, "there's still some muscle left in me. You sha'n't pass."

"Colonel, for mercy's sake," said Frossard, disguising his voice. "You do not know what you are about. You will be the cause of great mischief."

"The mischief is caused already," growled the Colonel

between his teeth. "At any rate, we shall know by whom."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" exclaimed Frossard, losing patience. And with herculean strength, raising the Colonel in his arms, he swung him round and flung him like a log on to one of the couches of the conservatory.

"Help, De Canalheilles!" shouted Merlot; "the scoundrel is murdering me!"

"Fly," said Frossard to Séverac. "The way is clear."

Pierre and the Countess took two steps to flee, but they stopped in terror. The Count had appeared on the threshold.

There was a terrible pause. All the actors in this dangerous scene remained in their places, not daring to move or speak. Merlot, half suffocated by Frossard and dizzy from his fall, was with difficulty recovering himself. Pierre and Sarah, pale and dejected, waited. Blanche, pushing aside the green boughs, advanced into the conservatory in the darkness, on hearing her uncle, whose voice sounded threateningly, revealing in this man, so much a master of himself, a formidable agitation. The Count had locked the door and put the key into his pocket; then crossing the conservatory he gained the door leading into the drawing-room, which he opened with the key withdrawn by him from the other side some moments previously.

"A light first of all," he said, with terrifying calmness.

He passed by Sarah and Pierre, chilled and motionless, without seeking to recognise them. He was in no hurry, and walked with precision and firmness, feeling himself the master of all there. Mademoiselle de Cygne saw him take a lamp from the drawing-room table. Seized with sudden shame, not wishing to be surprised there, dreading to be questioned, trembling, unnerved, she ascended the carved wooden staircase and disappeared in the room that was empty, and through which it would have been so easy for Sarah to escape, if Séverac had not before all sought to veil his crime from her for whom he had as much love as he had respect.

There Blanche stopped. Knowing herself to be safe, she grew uneasy about Pierre. From behind the curtain veiling

the entrance of the library she did not lose a movement of those who were awaiting the General's return. He re-entered the conservatory bareheaded and looking very pale under his white hair, and placing the lamp on a small round table cast a sweeping glance around him. He saw the Countess, and remained impassible; he knew she was there. But on perceiving Séverac he made a step backward. His features became fearfully contracted, the veins on his forehead swelled, and his eyes assumed a fixed expression.

"Pierre," he moaned, in a voice as weak as though he had just received a mortal wound.

"And Frossard," thundered the Colonel, triumphantly advancing towards the young man. "Frossard. I was sure of it"

"Be silent, sir," said Frossard severely. And he looked at the Colonel in such an extraordinary manner, raising his hands agitated by nervous trembling, that Merlot, atonished and excited at the same time, preserved silence.

The Count turned away from Séverac. In his heart he refused to believe him guilty. It was strange certainly that after ostensibly taking his leave he should have returned to meet the Countess in this spot. How was it Frossard had agreed to accompany him? There was in the meeting of these three a mystery that must be fathomed. He desired this ardently, and turning to the Countess, said:

"Sarah, will you explain how it is I find you here?"

By a manœuvre common to women, Sarah at once shifted the ground on which it was sought to place her. Answering one question with another:

"Was it you, sir, who fastened that door?" she asked, pointing with a haughty gesture to the door of the drawing-room.

"Yes, after having uselessly sought you in your own room," answered the old soldier. "But I beg of you, it must be easy for you, to throw light on this painful situation; do so in the interest of us all."

"After the procedure you have just made use of towards me!" exclaimed Sarah boldly. "Really this prayer comes somewhat late. You have used force. Well, continue."

And crossing her arms with a disdainful air, she seemed

to separate herself entirely from what was taking place, as a woman strong in her innocence might have done.

The Count repressed the wrath that commenced to stir within him. He wished to remain calm.

"Listen, Sarah, be reasonable," said he, "I suspected nothing, chance alone brought me here. A frightful doubt has taken possession of me, it is true. But does not everything justify my fears? And I do not think I show myself very exacting in claiming an explanation. If there is nothing wrong, a word will suffice. But utter it. You must. I insist on it, or else——"

Sarah drew herself up before the Count, her eyes glittering, ready for the struggle.

"Or else?" she echoed.

"Or else I cannot answer for myself," exclaimed the General, whose face, pale till then, became of a dusky red.

"You threaten me?" said Sarah "It is enough, I will not say another word."

"Take care."

And advancing towards her almost distracted, with quivering hands, the Count appeared ready for any violence. Before the others had time to make a step forward he was close to Sarah. They looked at one another, their faces almost touching. On the Countess's brow beamed indomitable courage, her lips wore a disdainful smile, her eyes a look of calmness. The Count drew back a step. Then, seeing himself thus braved, he exclaimed, in a tone of ineffable suffering:

"Oh! wretched woman. You are killing me"

He staggered and seemed about to fall. He had become ghastly pale. A double cry was heard. Séverac moved forward to the General's assistance. At the same time Mademoiselle de Cygne, raising the curtain, swept down the stairs like an apparition, and came to the General's support.

"Blanche!" exclaimed Monsieur de Canalheilles

And seating himself, overcome, his head dizzy, he let the young girl kiss his burning brow and clasp his icy hands. Sarah had drawn back on seeing Blanche. Frossard, recovering his self-possession, saw in Mademoiselle de Cygne's intervention a means of safety.

"I shall be very much astonished," growled Merlot, "if my daughter does not arrive in her turn."

On seeing Blanche it had seemed to the General that the horrible obscurity amidst which his mind was struggling was lit by a ray of pure light. If Blanche was in company of the Countess and with Pierre and Frossard, did not everything become innocent and natural?

"You were here, my child?" he asked.

Had he been less moved the Count would have heard in the silence the hoarse breathing of Séverac and Sarah, awaiting with more than painful anxiety the young girl's answer.

Blanche glanced calmly at the Countess and Pierre, and kissing the old soldier as though to excuse her pious falsehood.

"Yes, uncle, I was there," said she.

"In the dark?" insinuated Merlot perfidiously.

"No, Colonel," answered the young girl, without losing any of her calm. "We, the Countess, these gentlemen, and myself, were in the library. It was when you made all the noise at the door in trying to hinder Monsieur Séverac from going out that the Countess went down to see what was taking place. I must admit that I was afraid, and I remained upstairs listening."

Listening!

Pierre looked at the young girl imploringly. He saw her resolute and resigned, like a martyr prepared for the sacrifice. He would have liked to have thrown himself at her feet and cried to her, "Since you have heard all, you know that I hate and curse my crime. You know well that if I am here I was brought against my will. Forgive me for having caused you to undergo this trial, forgive me the humiliations to your pride and the insults to your purity."

"And what were you doing there in council?" asked the Count mildly.

Blanche hesitated. Carried away by the generosity of her heart to aid those who were so seriously threatened, wishing to prevent the Count from discovering the frightful truth, she had come forward without reflecting on what she was doing. And now it was necessary to invent a motive, to continue the deception. But what could she say?

Frossard came to the help of Mademoiselle de Cygne.

"If you will allow me, General, I will explain the facts of the case to you," said he, eyeing Merlot, who was grimacing in his corner: "it is a very simple matter."

Frossard's intervention put Séverac to torture. How was his friend going to give an explanation, when to do so seemed to him impossible? He dreaded some commonplace evasion, he was prepared for anything except degrading hypocrisy. The "It is a very simple matter" of Frossard, seemed to him as insulting as a blow.

Frossard went on.

"I was accompanying Séverac as far as the road. You saw us leave, I think. On the way I questioned him, as you advised me, you must remember. I asked him the reason of his sadness—the cause of his sudden departure. The words of a friend, at certain moments when the heart is overburdened with care, lead to an expansion. One gives way, one sometimes weeps, one always relates one's sorrows. It is a great relief to impart such confidences."

Frossard, sure of his ground, was now giving way to tricks of oratory. He rounded his periods, he ventured on touching adjectives. Séverac, Sarah, and Blanche, already seeing the end towards which the young notary was boldly tending, felt as though in a fiery furnace.

"Pierre allowed himself to be moved; he admitted to me that for a long time he had hopelessly loved a young girl of high birth and good fortune. How, with the simple name of Séverac, and having but a very small fortune indeed, could he aspire to the hand of this young girl? He would not subject himself to a humiliating refusal, he preferred to leave the country, and to live or die far from her. I sought to combat his scruples; I pressed him with questions, and, driven into a corner, he ended by acknowledging that she whom he loved——"

"Frossard!" interrupted Séverac, begging his friend to be silent.

"Go on," exclaimed the Count, "I command you."

"My dear fellow, your hesitations are now unreasonable," said Frossard to Séverac, "since, with the exception of the Count, we are all aware of your sentiments. The

moment has come to speak frankly—— Well, General, as he insisted on leaving the next day, I proved to him that he was mad, and I brought him back to the Chateau. It is the custom when one is in love to address oneself to the young girl's family; but as Séverac was afraid of you, we sought the Countess, and if Colonel Merlot, with somewhat inconsiderate energy, had not upset all our projects, you would have been very quietly informed to-morrow of that which one has been obliged to tell you under threats of the most frightful consequences."

And the young notary began to laugh, with the admirable calmness of a man enchanted at having accomplished his task successfully.

Sarah, for some moments, had lost all ideas of things and places. Frossard's words reached her ears like a confused murmur. Her eyes only saw things through a mist. She remained motionless, thinking that it was the end, that she was about to be annihilated, and that after this fearful trial there would be a long rest for her. One phrase, however, penetrated her understanding like a fiery dart, and threw an intense light on all things. A young girl! Pierre loved a young girl! She felt her heart shrivel within her breast, as though someone was positively wringing it, and casting a terrible look at Blanche and Séverac, she remained motionless and speechless, witnessing the mournful downfall of all her hopes, and the irreparable flight of all her cherished visions.

Frossard, drawing near in order to hinder the Count from noticing his wife, whose agitation was excessive, murmured:

"Take care, or you will compromise everything, and perhaps Pierre's life is in jeopardy."

She somewhat recovered her senses. His life or her happiness. Which to choose? She turned towards Pierre, and saw him gloomy and downcast. She sought for a revelation on his features. Did he love a young girl? Did he love another besides herself? Mademoiselle de Cygne, pale and motionless, caught her eye. She no longer doubted. Yes, the wretch had betrayed her, and for a long time past his heart was no longer hers, it belonged to

another. How could she have been so confident and so blind as not to suspect it? She ground her teeth, feeling herself caught in the snare so cleverly spread by Frossard. To save Pierre or to ruin him? "Well," she thought, "I will save him, he will owe me his honour, his life. I will retain dominion over him by my devotion, if I no longer retain him by my love."

"So, when you refused to stay, Séverac, it was because you loved Mademoiselle de Cygne," said the General, with a sternness that renewed the uneasiness of those present. "You did not dare to ask me for her? That is something to surprise me, after the proofs of affection I had given you. You were not ignorant, however, of all the esteem in which I held you. You knew well that for me, a brave soldier like yourself, pledged to the most brilliant future, was the equal of a noble, and ranked far above a millionaire—then whence this timidity?"

Frossard summoned Pierre by a look to put a good face on things, but the young officer's heart was overflowing from the storm raging within it. Beside himself, seized with a need of defending himself and convincing others,

"You had overwhelmed me with your kindnesses," he replied, with an emotion which affected all those around him. "After so many undeserved bounties, I should have been ashamed to ask you for more, for a gift a thousand-fold greater than you had already bestowed on me. Between you and myself the distance is so great, you are so noble, so generous, that I could not think even of raising myself on a level with you."

By these words, by the tone in which they were uttered, Pierre seemed to prostrate himself before the Count.

"You did not love sincerely then!" said the Count, his suspicions awakened afresh on seeing Pierre so strangely moved. "True love should overcome all obstacles."

"Ah! if you could read the bottom of my heart," replied the young officer, "you would see what unchangeable affection I had sworn to her whose name I have not even yet dared to utter before you. You would also see how wretched I am."

The Count no longer listened to Séverac, he was asking himself :

“How is the truth to be arrived at? Have they all with rare art come to an understanding to deceive me? If Pierre is really here for Blanche’s sake there is a means of knowing it.”

He turned towards Mademoiselle de Cygne :

“You have heard, my child, all that has been said. You have known Séverac for a long time. His happiness is in your hands? Well, if I offered him to you as a husband would you accept him?”

Blanche for a moment maintained a painful silence. She was thinking. “If I refuse, everything will be discovered. The Countess will be lost, and this poor old man, who has shown a father’s kindness to me, grieved for ever. But if I accept——?” She shuddered. To be the wife of him whom she had loved so dearly, whom she still loved, and whom she could no longer esteem, was not this a most cruel trial?

“Do you refuse?” said the Count, oppressed by insupportable anxiety. “For what reason? Speak, I beg of you, my peace of mind is at stake.”

“Ah! uncle,” said she, “you seem really to place me in the witness-box. This situation is very painful to me. You oblige me to reveal my inmost feelings, my most secret thoughts publicly. What young girl in my place would not be embarrassed and shamefaced? Believe me, however, that I am ready to do anything to satisfy and reassure you. Since your repose depends upon my answer, well then, yes; I know that Monsieur Séverac loves me, and that he has done so for a long time past. He has never spoken, but women are clear-sighted. You must have noticed that this evening when he bid us farewell, I was moved and troubled. It was because I saw him depart with grief and that I should have liked to have been able to have restrained him.”

Pierre made a movement to throw himself at Blanche’s feet. With a glance the young girl riveted him to the spot.

“So you will consent to become his wife?” said the Count.

"I am ready," answered Mademoiselle de Cygne, and she heroically added, "and I thank you for assuring my future."

"Well, Séverac, she is yours, I give her to you."

Sarah did not make the slightest movement, did not breathe a sigh. Her brows contracted, her eyes sank in their sockets and darkened as though she had been seized with some sudden illness. She looked at Pierre, whose hand the Count was joining to that of Blanche, as though to say:

"You see, I bravely endure the frightful tortures inflicted upon me. It is for your sake that I suffer thus. Are you at least grateful?"

She saw the two young people almost in a fainting condition when the Count said to them:

"Embrace one another, my children."

She shuddered when Pierre touched Mademoiselle de Cygne's cheek with his lips. But it was necessary to reply to her husband who approached her, saying humbly:

"I was somewhat harsh towards you just now. Will you forgive me?"

She bowed her head, not yet daring to speak, fearing the change in her voice. Frossard very adroitly approached her and effected a diversion which enabled the unhappy woman to recover herself.

"Well, old comrade," said the Count to Merlot, "you see what your fears and my suspicions amount to? We are old fools, my friend; we can no longer see plainly."

"Perhaps so," growled the Colonel between his teeth. "But is it when we see things all in black or all in white?"

"Come, Frossard, go with your friend on his way home," said the Count, smiling, "and this time do not bring him back."

Blanche walked a few steps with Séverac on his way out. At the threshold of the door, having bathed her brow in the night air, she said:

"Sir, I was here just now. I heard all I have sacrificed myself to save the honour of him whom you have outraged. But know that I do not love you, and that I never shall."

Séverac bowed to this sentence without replying a single word, and withdrew with despair at his heart.

CHAPTER XVII

SHUT up in her spacious bedchamber, furnished in the Louis Seize style, with hangings of silk brocade, covered with lace, Sarah was able to give way to her passion without restraint. Once out of her husband's presence, far from Séverac and Blanche, finding herself no longer under the threatened blow, and recovering all her clearness of mind, she said to herself that she had been tricked. Frossard had adroitly turned the situation so as to divest it of all incriminating appearance, and Pierre and Blanche had odiously profited thereby. They loved, they were about to be one another's, and it was she who was the cause of it!

She remained seated with her elbow on her knee buried in thought. She did not weep. Her brain, converted into a fiery furnace, dried up her tears. She was seeking means to break off this marriage. It was impossible for it to take place. She would not allow it. Honour forbade Pierre to abandon her. And then, could he be happy with any other than herself? Her conscience, which she strove to stifle, would make itself heard in spite of all. She recalled Séverac's coldness, his determination to flee, and all the efforts he had made to seek death. He had loved Blanche, and seeing himself separated from her for ever had preferred not to live. She had never been willing to admit these harrowing truths to herself. She had closed her eyes in order not to see, her ears so as not to hear. She had done everything to prolong her false security. But a thunderbolt had dispelled the darkness and broken the silence, and she had to yield to evidence, distressing as it was. Séverac no longer loved her, he loved another. Oppressed by a terrible sense of sadness, Sarah thought of making away with herself. By an impulse of generous pride she recognised that she was the sole obstacle between

these two and happiness. Living, she separated them by the ever-recurring recollection of the sin. Dead, she would allow them that forgetfulness, so prompt, alas! to take its place in the human heart. Little by little their prejudices would weaken, their mistrust wear away, and, youth triumphing over their rancour, they would love again and be happy.

And she would lie in the cold ground whilst they would be strolling with their arms around each other. It would be another who would taste all the joys of which she had dreamed. That arm on which she had leant so tenderly, another would hang on in rapture. Those eyes, the light of which was her beacon, another would find soft and caressing. Those kisses, which were her due, another would receive, and might return. At this idea her mind wandered; she gave vent to cries of despair, and with her sharp teeth tore her handkerchief as she would fain have torn her rival.

"Never!" she exclaimed. "It shall not be! I would rather slay her with my own hands! If he wants her, he shall only have her dead!"

She was terrible to look at thus, her golden hair floating down her back, her hands extended convulsively, her lips contracted by a cruel laugh. Her wild nature, for a moment softened, reasserted itself in all its indomitable violence. Her instinct of dominion carried her away. The triumph of her will was a necessity to her. She would have an enthralled slave instead of a faithful lover. What did being loved matter to her? What was necessary was that *she* should love! And there was only a single being that she could love—Pierre.

She no longer recked of the world's prejudices; she no longer thought about keeping up appearances. She was ready to clear all bounds, to break through all social trammels. She thought of going away, leaving her husband, carrying off Pierre, and living with him far from the pettinesses of human existence.

India, with its fiery sky, attracted her. In a dazzling vision she saw a fairylike palace, hidden beneath the verdure of gigantic trees, surrounded by the blue waters of

a lake. There, amidst the soft delights of an Eastern life, with Pierre beside her, she should be happy. Consumed by a raging fever, she was borne away by her delirious imagination to the land of dreams. She hovered above the earth; nothing chained her to it any longer. With her wings she had placed a distance between those who surrounded her and whom she sought to flee, and the happy land where she would guard her lover. She could not admit that he might refuse to follow her. She was resolved to force him to do so, and to ensure to him, at the cost of a transient compulsion, a long existence of exquisite felicity.

Daylight filtering through her drawn curtains surprised her, and aroused her to the realities of the position. In a moment she recalled that she had not the all-powerful wand of an enchanter in her hands, and that if she wished to triumph in the struggle just commenced she would have to summon all her strength, and act at once with prudence and energy. Her head aching, her body exhausted, she went to bed and slept a heavy sleep, disturbed by painful dreams full of harrowing and mournful scenes. On awaking she recovered all her astute boldness, formed her plans, and was ready to present herself to those about her with a calm face, on which no trace of her terrible agitation remained.

It was with Blanche that she sought to commence the attack. The real enemy was this young girl, grave, silent, and cold. In what humour would she find her? Perhaps frightened by the revelations that she owed to chance, she would come to an agreement to devise some expedient for at any rate postponing the marriage. Perhaps, on the other hand, led away by hatred against her who had taken the man she loved, she would refuse to break off the engagement entered into in the Count's presence. At the thought that Blanche might think of opposing her, Sarah again felt her anger burn within her. She smiled bitterly, and, prepared for anything, made her way to the young girl's apartment.

On reaching her room Blanche had thrown herself on her knees in an outburst of despairing piety. To flee

the harrowing thoughts that clashed together in her head she began to pray. She offered the Almighty her suffering as a homage. She saw in the blow that had smitten her a divine punishment for having abandoned the conventual life for which she had destined herself. In the convent, at the foot of altars she would have been calm and happy. She had wished to live, to love, and she must suffer for it. She did not complain. She was resigned. The thought of the sacrifice exalted her. She had given herself entirely to misfortune like a martyr without hesitation or regret. To spare pain to a man whom she loved and venerated she had doomed herself to the ever-renewed tortures of a poisoned existence. She bent to the hand laid upon her without a murmur, without a complaint; she lifted up her soul to God, and asked for strength to undergo the trial.

It was in the main a return to her life of abnegation and renunciation. A wife, she would have neither husband nor children. She would devote herself to the unhappy. Her separated existence would resemble that of the cloister. She would be the more troubled by temptation, the more assailed by evil thoughts. She would have to defend herself more fervidly. Would not the merit of triumphing be the greater?

But already between her and her Creator a figure appeared—that of Pierre. Had he not also his ordeal? Had not his expiation begun some time back? She saw him pale and sad, bearing his life as a burthen, and doing all he could to tear himself from evil. The bad angel was there beside him, speaking to him in the shade, reminding him of the pleasures and joys of the past, showing him those of the future, and urging him to yield to their temptations. And he gloomy, tortured, but resisting the allurements of the senses, refused.

Despite herself Blanche pictured this fatal angel under the form of Sarah—her dazzling complexion beneath her golden hair, her bewildering blue eyes full of mad promises, her imperious lips. She displayed her beautiful bare shoulders, she laughed lasciviously, hanging herself on Pierre's neck, seeking to draw him to her, murmuring seductive words in his ear. And he, holding out his hands

to the young girl, begged her to come to his aid, saying, "You are my good angel, protect me, defend me. Near you I once more become good, true, and loyal. You are my safeguard, remain beside me, and I shall not again fall into the snare of the evil one." She then went slowly, and placed herself beside him, and with a cry of rage Sarah withdrew. Little by little she disappeared, as though vanishing into air, and Blanche remained alone with Pierre, his heart appeased, and his mind calmed.

The young girl sought to banish these visions; she was in despair at being disturbed in her pious meditation. All that promised her a glimpse of happiness she refused to entertain. It seemed to her that if she came to hope for happiness in her union with Pierre she would be guilty of an act of hypocritical selfishness in permitting this to take place. Could she forget? Would not the infamous past always rear itself threateningly between her husband and herself? Simple and pure, she did not admit the possibility of their drawing closely together. If this thought had occurred to her she would have repulsed it with horror. It would have seemed to her that then she was only marrying him whom she loved to carry him off from Sarah. Led away by her religious fervour, rekindled more ardently than ever, she would see only a soul to be saved. She would wrest this unhappy being from the evil counsels of despair, and devote herself to his rehabilitation. Nothing earthy materialised these purely celestial ideas. And Blanche, soothed, sure of herself, felt strong enough to sustain the struggle into which fate had led her.

After a last prayer she retired to rest and slept peacefully.

It was ten o'clock in the morning. She had just informed Madeleine of the changes that had taken place in her life. Without betraying Sarah's secret she had explained the rapid and surprising course of events. Knowing for a long time past Blanche's affection for Séverac, Mademoiselle Merlot, deceived by her friend's calmness, had received the news with joy. Mademoiselle de Cygne was looking through an open window into the garden, listening abstractedly to the pleasant projects

Madeleine was sketching for the future. Both married to the men of their choice—for the Colonel's daughter could not admit that her marriage with Frossard would not take place—they would live in a delightful intimacy. Séverac would return to Paris, and the two young wives would not leave one another. A cloud passed over Blanche's brow. That was, however, what might have been. And what happiness indeed it would have been. But all this happiness was irremediably destroyed. She would be married in white as a virgin bride, but with the inconsolable sadness of a widow in her heart.

Two smart taps against the panel of the door aroused her from her painful thoughts. She glanced indifferently round, and suddenly becoming very pale, rose on perceiving Sarah's beautiful face in the shadow of the passage. With a sign she dismissed her friend, who passed silently into the library.

The two women remained face to face, scarcely daring to look at one another, and both trembling—

"I have come to thank you," said Sarah, boldly speaking first, "for the service you rendered me. Without you, an act of imprudence, grave without doubt, but above all in appearances——"

Blanche made a gesture of entreaty. Sarah's audacity in endeavouring to disguise a certain, evident, and undeniable sin as a simple act of imprudence, opened the terrible depths of her perversity to the young girl's mind.

"No, I must justify myself in your eyes," resumed Sarah firmly. "You may really believe that it was a question of an explanation between Monsieur Séverac and myself of very little moment. It was an act of culpable levity on my part to receive him in secret, but his friend Frossard was present, do not forget that."

A faint smile, that made Sarah very uneasy, played for a moment on Mademoiselle de Cygne's lips, and lit up her melancholy face.

"I wish, in short, to pay my debt to you," continued Sarah. "How can I best do so?"

"By never speaking to me again of that painful scene," murmured Blanche, blushing and shamefaced, for she

caught in Sarah's voice, as it were, an echo of the frightful words that she had heard during the fatal night.

"I must, however, this once at least," said Sarah persistently. "You devoted yourself on my behalf with admirable generosity. But I cannot consent that you should submit to the full extent to the consequences of your devotion. This marriage is out of the question, and I place myself at your service to help you to break it off."

Blanche did not raise her head; her features remained motionless, her eyelids only quivered violently. She understood what Sarah wanted with her thus early; before she could herself see the Count. Sarah wished to extract a promise from her that, after having accepted the husband given her by Monsieur de Canalheilles, she would agree to break off the match. She had been able to bear Blanche's betrothal to Séverac, but she would not have her become his wife. She claimed back her lover. A revolt took place in Blanche's heart at the thought of Sarah thus daring cynically to claim her guilty rights.

"Is it from interest in me," said she, "that you propose to me to break off this marriage? Is it not rather from love for him whom I am to wed?"

"What do you mean to say?" exclaimed Sarah, in a voice so harsh that it thrilled the nerves of her rival.

"I say," replied Blanche firmly, "that it is quite useless for you to try to deceive me. I was in the conservatory during your interview with Monsieur Séverac, and I did not lose a single one of your words."

On hearing this Sarah drew herself up, and advancing towards Mademoiselle de Cygne with glittering eyes, exclaimed:

"Then you know that I love him enough to hesitate at nothing when he is concerned!"

"I know that you have not hesitated to dishonour him whose name you bear. I see that you do not hesitate at acknowledging your sin. And I believe that you would not hesitate to sacrifice everything to your abominable passion."

"Listen," said Sarah, in a tone of exaltation, "you are prompt to blame. Do you know how much I strove before

allowing myself to be led away to love him? I did everything to drive him away from me. Chance incessantly brought him back before my eyes. I resisted strongly, but fate was too powerful. And now I adore him: I cannot live without him! I will not try to do so any more, I have suffered too much. He must be near me, all my own! You do not understand this madness, you who are calm, who love with reason. The impulses to which I yield frighten you. They seem to you monstrous, but they are the very spring of my life. If I must give up Pierre I shall die!"

And Sarah displayed to Blanche features convulsed by the sensations she was undergoing.

"You would rather that others should suffer, that others should die," answered Mademoiselle de Cygne. "What frightful selfishness is yours! Has not the terrible lesson you received last evening served to enlighten you? You trample on all the sentiments which the most humble creatures obey without thinking themselves sublime. You break all bonds at will, without asking yourself whether by doing so you will not cause great misfortunes. It suffices that they are irksome to you for you to wish to destroy them. What power do you possess that you should imagine this will always be possible for you? You wish to lead an unhappy man into fresh sin, you wish to betray one who has shown every kindness and every weakness towards you, you dispose of myself according to your fancy. Well, you are wrong, and all that which you dream of shall not take place. Feeble as I am, I will resist your exigencies. Despite yourself you shall keep to the path of duty. You shall give up him whom you love, and you shall respect your husband."

Raising her hand with proud and unshakable energy, the young girl presented to Sarah the celestial and heroic image of those angels who, in pictures of the mystic school, sustain by their presence the courage of the warriors engaged in combat with demons. She reared herself, radiant and invincible, between the Countess and her victims. Sarah felt herself powerless, she buried her nails in her hands clenched with passion. She remained for a moment

silent, as though cast down, in deep reflection. Then with bitter irony, eager to repay the young girl the tortures she had just experienced—

“You who speak so proudly of abnegation and virtue, are you quite sure you are not yielding to personal sentiment? You love Pierre. Is not that the secret of your ardour in disputing his possession with me? You make the cause of others your own, because it is to your interest that it should triumph!”

Blanche uttered a cry. It seemed to her that Sarah had with sacrilegious daring penetrated into the closed sanctuary of her soul, and profaned the pure sentiment that she had religiously preserved within it. Her heart bled from the blow thus treacherously dealt her

“Yes, I loved him,” she said, “and without you I might have been happy. But you crossed his path, and now between him and me there are memories that naught can efface. He whom I regarded as the type of honour and pride has been lowered and degraded in my eyes. Perhaps you and I do not understand love in the same way, but it seems to me that it is impossible to love without esteem”

“The love of a cold and calculating girl!” exclaimed Sarah. “You claim to guide your heart instead of being guided by it. You are not the submissive and devoted slave of him whom you love. You would hold him at a distance, judge him, condemn him. My love is of quite another kind. He whom I love might become infamous, I should still love him; he might be a prey to the hatred and contempt of the whole world, I would defend him against the whole world. What matters it what he has done? It is he who has done it, and that is enough for me. But you deceive yourself, or, rather, you seek to deceive me. There is in Pierre’s sin a disturbing attraction which acts on you irresistibly. Instead of repudiating him you attach yourself to him. You speak very loudly of respect for duty. But thus you mask your projects. What you want is Pierre. And it is under the mask of self-devotion that you seek to carry him off from me.”

Sarah laughed scornfully.

“Be prudent,” she continued; “do not risk becoming

my rival. A man does not easily forget a woman such as I. And even should Pierre love you for a few weeks, my remembrance will always have dominion over him, and will bring him back to me."

"I believe," said Blanche mildly, "that you would cause me great unhappiness. But, perhaps, I shall be your only victim. In that case I shall be repaid for all my suffering in being the only one to suffer."

There was a moment's silence. Sarah, giving way to all the violence of her anger, cast looks of mortal hatred towards her adversary. She spoke aloud without noticing it, letting these terrible phrases escape her:

"This girl is of marble; she will remain inert and frozen. I shall obtain nothing from her. Why did I not let Pierre go back to Africa? She would have never seen him again. He would perchance have met his death there. But what is death compared to his infidelity? He another woman's!"

She ground her teeth, and her complexion turned yellow, as though all her bile had passed into her blood. Her sufferings must have been horrible. She uttered stifled cries, and walked about heedlessly like a mad woman. Blanche looked at her with fear and almost with pity. Guilty passion could then bring a woman to this point! Sarah, growing more calm, stopped beside Blanche. She no longer threatened; she held out her hands imploringly to the young girl. In tearful tones she said—

"Do not drive me to extremities, I beg of you; spare me, you see what I suffer. Be merciful; it seems to me that virtue should be pitiful. I have never done you any harm; why do you want to injure me? Give up this marriage."

"It is the only proof of your innocence that we can give your husband. To appear to draw back would be to revive his suspicions, to kill him."

"You are implacable!" exclaimed Sarah, with the dejection of despair.

Tears flowed down her cheeks as she realised her helplessness.

"Ah! I am accursed," she murmured. "What can I do to mitigate this torture?"

"Your duty," answered Mademoiselle de Cygne gravely.

Sarah shook her head.

"That is your last word?" she asked.

"It was the first and will be the last," replied Blanche.

Without another word Sarah passed out of the room.

Blanche sat down mechanically, and remained for some time thinking, fatigued and exhausted as though from violent exertion. Ideas floated confusedly in her mind, without her being able to concentrate them. A feeling of terror reigned in the depth of her soul. She felt convinced that by Sarah's means she would run great dangers. Of what kind? She could not tell. She had not at that moment the power to foresee, but she felt herself threatened.

She was so tired of the struggle that she thought it would be a relief to her if she could suddenly die. She would then no longer have to mix herself up in frightful intrigues; she would find rest and forgetfulness. Led away by these gloomy reflections she recalled the sad recollection of her father's funeral. She again saw the miry cemetery, the grey and lowering sky, the trees quivering beneath the autumn blast, the black tombs with their faded wreaths, the workmen in a hurry to complete their task, the inattentive and indifferent spectators, and alone, at the corner of a chapel, a tall young man in black, weeping silently, with his eyes fixed on the horizon. Ah! how she had loved him from that first moment in which he had appeared, the only one of all those around her sharing her own deep sadness. And it was he, the cause of so many woes.

Joyous laughter reached her through the open window. Her glance wandered towards the park. On the ornamental water La Liviniere, Pompéran, his wife, and Mrs Smarden were rowing about in a boat, escorted by the swans, who swam round them majestically, following the little craft with jealous eyes. Madame de Pompéran, who wanted to row, and with her little hands encased in Swedish kid gloves, was handling the sculls with difficulty. She was striking the water irregularly, splashing and sprinkling

the others, who were laughing at her efforts and her want of skill. Her face had grown crimson under her broad-brimmed hat, and her cheeks puffed out from holding her breath. Seated at the edge of the terrace, the Count was quietly smoking a cigar and watching this pleasant picture. Frossard was walking hastily up and down, and seemed to be meditating on some important matter of business.

The contrast between this peaceful scene and the cruel agitation under which she laboured struck Blanche. She understood the necessity of a reaction, and of facing everyone with calm countenance. The war that Sarah had declared against her was about to be waged in secret. Each blow would be struck in the dark, and the most terrible threats would be disguised beneath smiles. Would she be able to sustain such a contest? She thought of abandoning the field. She would find an excuse, and withdraw by the end of a week or so. The convent was there to offer her shelter full of contemplative quietude. With the religious ideas with which the Count knew her to be imbued, could he think it surprising if she asked to pass some days in retirement there before entering upon a new existence?

Comforted by the prospect of such rest and quiet, she felt ready to brave the looks of the inmates of the Chateau, and went downstairs. On seeing her the Count came forward. He scanned his niece's face. Blanche smiled at him affectionately. A flood of tenderness welled up in her heart, and taking the old man's arm she leant on it. Tears glistened in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks without her being able to restrain them. The Count, deeply moved, pressed her hand and slowly led her aside under the tall trees.

"My dear child," said he, "you see now what a lack of confidence may lead to. For an hour we all underwent terrible anguish. But young girls are shy. I had, however, opened a way for you to make your confession by asking you a little time before whether you did not love anyone. You can't deceive a father in such things, and I am a father to you."

He smiled on her with great sweetness, as he thus spoke,

and the emotion he felt caused his voice, accustomed to tones of command, to tremble.

"Oh! I suffered cruelly in thinking I had to punish ingrates," he continued, becoming very serious. "I have often jested about jealousy and jealous people. I was wrong. I spoke of what I knew nothing about. Now I understand that there are moments when, led away by anger, a man loses his senses and sheds blood."

Blanche, struck by the emphatic tone in which the Count had uttered these last words, made a movement as though to arrest an arm already uplifted. It seemed to her that the old soldier had just pronounced Séverac's death sentence. She strove to jest.

"You talk of shedding blood very quietly," said she, watching the General attentively.

"Yes; I am quite cool this morning, but last night I learned what is meant by seeing red. I had for some moments a mist of blood before my eyes, and if you had not come like a guardian angel——"

The Count remained silent a short time, and then continuing the train of his thoughts—

"At my age, alas! one must be indulgent towards a woman. It is very foolish to reckon on the love of a charming creature of whom one might be the father. Her crime, abominable as it may be, might have extenuating circumstances. But the man? The friend, the *protégé*, who takes advantage of the doors of the house being thrown wide open to him to steal your honour——"

He clenched his hands fiercely, again taken possession of by the emotion of that tragic hour of the preceding night. Then recovering his calmness

"One of our admirals, whose adventure is still fresh in the memory of all the men of my day, suffered such a misfortune; his wife betrayed him with one of his officers. He resigned the service, and called the young man out."

"And——?" questioned Blanche, chilled with terror.

"He killed him," answered the Count with formidable coolness. "But I beg your pardon, my child, I have been foolishly speaking of mournful subjects that never ought to have saddened your thoughts. You are already a young

woman, you know what grief is, you will excuse me. Ah! I want to see you happy. If Séverac, after the great favour you confer on him in granting him your hand, does not pass his whole life in loving you—— But he does love you, for he too has been greatly changed for a year past."

"Here is the author of all the mischief," said Blanche, with feigned gaiety, pointing to Merlot, who was approaching with a grim air.

"Ah! yes, he's certainly the most mistrustful being under the vault of heaven," exclaimed the Count. "Well, Colonel, how are you this morning? I heard you practising with the pistol in the kitchen garden. Are the eye and hand still steady? What are you thinking of hitting?"

"You will see," growled Merlot.

"Here's my niece about to be married, you will no longer have any excuse for refusing Madeleine to Frossard."

"Frossard!" exclaimed the old soldier, starting back as though he had seen a reptile at his feet.

"Were you asking for me, Colonel?" was uttered in a soft voice; and Frossard, making his appearance, smiled most amiably at his persecutor.

"Come, my dear fellow, make your peace with this lad," said the General. "Your hostility, which has no grounds to rest on, becomes ridiculous."

"I was just wishing to speak to this gentleman," said the Colonel, indicating Frossard; "he arrives most opportunely."

"I am at your service, Colonel," replied the young notary. And with a gesture of intelligence to the Count and the young girl, he took up his position resolutely in face of Merlot.

The Count and Blanche walked towards the landing stage, which the boating party had, by the efforts of Madame de Pompéran, succeeded in reaching.

"Sir," said Merlot, left alone with Frossard, "I have an explanation to ask from you. You allowed yourself certain liberties towards me last evening."

"Quite so, Colonel," broke in Frossard, unflinchingly supporting Merlot's dominating glance.

"But do you know you are not wanting in audacity!" exclaimed Merlot in astonishment.

"Exactly, I have plenty," said Frossard coolly, "and I reckon on showing some more."

The Colonel remained stupefied, asking himself whether he were not dreaming, and whether Frossard had not been changed into somebody else. The patient young man, who bowed his head beneath sarcasm and impertinence, had disappeared. In his stead Merlot saw a bold and bantering young fellow, quick at stopping and clever at countering. However, he would not own himself beaten, and sought to recover his ascendancy.

"But, sir, I could call you to serious account for your conduct."

"Call me, Colonel."

"You used violence towards me."

"Exactly."

"You dare to acknowledge it?"

"I dare. I will dare anything in future. For some time past, Colonel, I have tried to win you over by mildness. I have petted, caressed, and flattered you. You have answered all my amiabilities with rebuffs. So, as I am not stupidly mulish, I have resolved to alter my tactics. And in future in my relations towards you I contemplate showing myself as disagreeable as you are yourself."

The Colonel was thunderstruck. It was the first time that he had been spoken to in such a style. He sought for some killing phrase that would have smitten his interlocutor like a poleaxe. He could not find one, and stood gaping.

"I know very well that it will be difficult," continued Frossard, with mocking modesty, "but by dint of application, and with your example before me, I shall succeed. And flattered at having met with an individual as crabbed and as partial to growling as yourself, you will indubitably end in granting me your daughter's hand."

"Never!" thundered Merlot, recovering speech.

"We shall see."

"Go to the deuce."

"I am there, Colonel."

And responding to Merlot's scathing glance with a graceful bow, Frossard left the Colonel completely petrified, as the latter subsequently acknowledged.

Joyful exclamations aroused him from his stupor. The Count had just announced to his friends the news of Mademoiselle de Cygne's marriage, and surrounding the young girl they all broke out in praises and congratulations. Certainly she could not have made a better choice. Pierre was in all respects worthy of her. The care with which Séverac had kept his intended departure secret was of great assistance at this juncture. Madame Smarden declared that she had always expected that matters would turn out in this way. Séverac had loved Blanche for a long time, La Liviniere asserted, and it was clear, too, that the young girl did not regard her uncle's aide-de-camp with an unfavourable eye. This was the only reason, he remarked confidentially to Pompéran, that had hindered him from entering the lists himself. But with his practised eye he had seen from the first moment that there was nothing to be done. And all exclaimed in chorus that they would make a splendid couple. Little Madame de Pompéran only regretted that Séverac was not of higher birth. Plain Madame Séverac!—it sounded rather flat.

"But, my dear," said Gaston, "Séverac will certainly obtain the requisite authority, and he will assume the title of Marquis Séverac de Cygne—that will sound very well."

"You may be sure that Séverac will not do anything of the kind," said Frossard. "We live in days when names are only valued on account of the men who bear them. What is a Montmorency who does no more than perpetuate his ancestral line? Is it not better to be Monsieur No-matter-who, and render oneself illustrious, than to assume a borrowed name as one would a second-hand garment? To do so is to have very little self-respect. Mademoiselle de Cygne will not regret being called Madame Séverac. Above all when her husband commands an army!"

Thus everyone had foreseen this union. It took its place in the category of infallible events. Everyone entered into details as to its advantages. Sarah had to listen to these commonplace reflections, nod approval, and appear to

rejoice when she was eaten up with unspeakable anger. Public opinion, represented by five or six of the indifferent and the gossiping who go to make up its constitutive elements, declared itself in favour of the marriage. The long category of people who are swayed by cut-and-dried reasons would follow as a matter of course. Nothing that might be attempted would alter their view. They would resolutely make cause against anyone who should seek to disturb this union, which from the first moment had been regarded as a suitable one.

And then Blanche was innocence, virtue. Sarah was guilt. Between the two there could be no possible hesitation. All that Pierre was about to see and hear was calculated to favour Blanche and do an ill-turn to Sarah. A concert of praises already rose around the young girl, and each of the eulogies in her honour must re-echo in Pierre's mind as a reflection on Sarah. The betrothed presented herself adorned with every grace, embellished with every charm. The mistress must appear troublesome, because she clung desperately to her lover: hateful, because she personified remorse. Despite all these disadvantages which she took into consideration, Sarah was obstinately bent upon resistance.

Blanche received the compliments paid her with smiling complacency. She answered with tact and decorum. The impression that Mademoiselle de Cygne was a sensible young person who knew perfectly what she wanted was confirmed. At breakfast Sarah was a little too gay. It seemed to all that Blanche's happiness caused such satisfaction to the Countess that joy overflowed from her eyes and from her lips. No one, save Frossard, guessed the fever that raged within her and lent this warmth to her words, this sparkle to her glances. To the actors in this drama Sarah was admirable. She sustained the disadvantageous struggle commenced by her with superhuman courage.

Her apparent gaiety concealed a horrible impatience. She was awaiting Séverac. Upon his face she hoped to discover traces of a trouble and an anguish such as she was herself suffering. And, her nerve not failing her, she

fulfilled her duties as mistress of the house with matchless spirits. The Count, enchanted, approached her.

"What is the matter with you, my dear?" he asked, happy to see her so dazzling.

"I?" she answered, "I am so pleased like yourself, like everyone else."

The Count nodded affectionately, and thought within himself that she really must have a good heart. He reproached himself. How could he have suspected this adorable woman? It was that old dotard Merlot, with his ridiculous ideas, that had disturbed his mind. But deuce take it if they caught him being guilty of such folly again! He had been too much punished by what he had suffered.

Séverac arrived towards five o'clock, escorted by Frossard, who, foreseeing his friend's uneasiness, had thought of going to meet him. What Pierre feared most was not to find himself face to face with Sarah or the Count, but to find himself in presence of Blanche. He ascended the terrace steps with trembling footsteps and advanced, a prey to greater emotion than on the day when he was for the first time under fire.

"Ah, behold him! behold him!" sang Pompéran. "Ladies and gentlemen, we ought to have organised a scratch choir and received him with 'Haste to the Wedding.'"

"Hail, happy man!" exclaimed La Livinière empathically. "You triumph everywhere, in love and war."

"Good-day, my dear boy," said the Count affectionately, taking the hand that Pierre held out to him with a pain at his heart. And, greatly moved, he added, "This house is now doubly your own."

"She is not here," whispered Frossard in his friend's ear.

Séverac glanced round him, and indeed failed to perceive Blanche. He breathed more freely. Sarah alone, erect, with her arms folded, awaited him in a resolute attitude. He bowed before her. She eyed him calmly, and in a quiet voice said:

"Well, Monsieur Séverac, have you had pleasant dreams?"

The young man's attentive ear caught the scarcely notice-

able emphasis laid by Sarah on the word "you." He understood that she was asking, "Have you suffered like myself?" He bent his head dejectedly and remained silent. Frossard, attentive to all that was going on, approached Pierre.

"Mademoiselle de Cygne was here a moment ago," he said out aloud, as though answering a question from Séverac.

"But she has gone to dress for dinner," observed Madeleine, quite innocently taking a share in Frossard's scheme.

The latter gave the young girl a grateful look, and clasping Séverac's arm, conducted him to the edge of the terrace. Sarah boldly rejoined them within ten paces of the Count, who was chatting with Mrs Smarden and La Liviniere.

"Remain here, Monsieur Frossard," she said to the young notary, who was on the point of retiring. "You may hear what I have to say, and your presence is useful; it will prevent suspicion. For it has come to that point"

She paused a moment with labouring breath

"But I will make no useless complaints," she resumed. "Pierre, what are your projects? What do you mean to do? This marriage is out of the question, you surely understand that? The thought that you could dream of marrying Blanche drives me mad. But time presses. The Count has told me that we leave next week for Paris. It must be broken off. How? I do not know. Seek, find a means. But, for pity's sake, say one word to give me hope."

And as Pierre, sad and anxious-looking, did not reply,

"But you must admit that this marriage cannot take place?" she exclaimed, incapable of restraining herself.

"Take care, madame, for Heaven's sake!" said Frossard, rendered very uneasy.

"Ah!" moaned Sarah, "here is Blanche"

Mademoiselle de Cygne was descending the steps leading from the doorway. With a glance she had noted the Countess between Séverac and Frossard. She had guessed the discussion that was in progress. With a firm step she advanced towards the group. Sarah, full of anxiety, saw her approach as though to take Pierre from her. She made a movement to place herself between the young girl

and him, the possession of whom she sought to dispute with her. Frossard sharply pushed Séverac towards Mademoiselle de Cygne, saying :

“Go and meet your betrothed.”

Sarah, helpless, saw Pierre approach Blanche. She saw him bow and speak without being able to hear what he said. Unconscious of what she was doing, she seized Frossard's arm, and gripped it with a nervous energy that left cruel marks on his flesh. The young notary stoically flinched not. He was watching Blanche's attitude with an uneasy eye, and only seemed reassured when he had seen his friend, at the Count's order, offer his arm to Mademoiselle de Cygne, and walk slowly away with her. Then he returned to the Countess. The poor woman, leaning against the balustrade, seemed to have been carried far away by her thoughts. She no longer paid any attention to what was taking place around her. Her eyelids lowered, her lips compressed, her mind was bent upon an end that Frossard only suspected too well—the breaking off of this marriage. She raised her eyes, and with a look full of reproach towards Frossard, repeated :

“His betrothed? You, too, believe, then, that it is possible?”

“Alas! how can it be prevented?” asked the young notary, hypocritically feigning to fall in with Sarah's views. “To draw back now is to admit to the Count that he has been deceived, and that his fears were well founded.”

The Countess struck her hands together angrily.

“You all give me the same answer.”

“It is because there is, unfortunately, no other to give. It was necessary first of all to justify the situation, and we were very fortunate in Mademoiselle de Cygne having lent herself to this with such admirable self-abnegation.”

A smile of pity flitted across Sarah's lips. She thought that Frossard was ignorant of Blanche's love for Pierre. She would not reveal it to him, fearing to cause him to range himself wholly on the side of her rival. But irritated by the obstacles with which she came in contact every time she sought to bring matters back to their former state, she said :

"However it may be, this marriage shall not take place. For nothing in the world will I agree to it. Pierre shall break it off, with or without my help. And if he betray me, woe unto him!"

A threatening light kindled in her eyes; her sharp teeth bit her lips. She left Frossard greatly alarmed.

"By Jove, there is something of the wild beast about that woman," said he to himself; "she looked at me like a tigress. If I were in Séverac's place I should not feel safe. In a moment of fury she would be capable of anything. I must ask Pierre whether she has any letters of his."

Pierre and Blanche, arm-in-arm, had at first walked on in silence. A heavy sense of constraint weighed upon them. The young girl's hand scarcely touched her companion's sleeve. Instinctively they had withdrawn from their friends, in order that their mutual embarrassment might not be noticed. Certainly no one would have said on seeing them, "Here is a pair of fond lovers." They loved each other, however, and with their whole souls. Alone together for the first time, free to speak, with tender words rising to their lips, they were silent, fearful, and ashamed. The recollection of Sarah followed them in their solitude, and sin had created a gulf between them. They walked without looking where they were going to, listening to their hearts, which rose in revolt against the severity of their consciences. What! because a woman had crossed Séverac's path, were they doomed to sacrifice a future of happiness? Their secretly-indulged hopes were about to be realised; they would be united; and they must spurn these delightful realities, and live bowed down beneath the burden of remorse, separated from one another like two criminals. Alas! was not the sin one of those for which there is no absolution? Had not the outrage sullied the honour of the man whom Blanche loved as a second father; had it not assailed herself in her innocence? And between her love and her anger the young girl struggled painfully, her heart rent in twain, wishing to forgive, and unable to forget.

She suddenly halted, recalled to herself. Before her the high road stretched dustily between its grassy slopes.

They had reached the spot where a year before Blanche had come to bid a last farewell to Pierre. They looked at one another, and their eyes filled with tears. They remembered that short moment during which their souls went out in thought towards one another. Each turn of the wheel was then taking them farther away from each other, and they had wished that an unforeseen obstacle might bar the road in order that it should not be possible to proceed farther. He had, however, continued on his way, and had disappeared at a turning of the tall forest growth that stretched itself before them, dark and mysterious. And she had remained very sad. Less sad, however, than at this present moment, when he whom she loved was beside her. For between her and him then there was only space, and now——

“It was there,” murmured Pierre, in a low tone.

“Yes,” said she. “And already——”

Blanche bowed her head. She looked sadly at Séverac. A sob that she could not check rose to her lips, and she sank upon a marble bench.

“Blanche!” exclaimed Pierre, upset by the sight of this grief; “overwhelm me, repulse me, do with me what you will, I am at your mercy, and to suffer at your hands will still be unhoped-for happiness to me. But do not accuse me unjustly. I have been an ingrate towards others, but I have never been disloyal to you. Oh! no, no, I have never been false to you; I have ever been faithful to the love with which you inspired me. From the day that I loved you, all was at an end. You have had no rival in my heart; I have only lived for you. I held my sin in horror; I wished to punish myself for it by death, for I felt so unworthy that I dared not even in thought aspire to you. Oh! I have adored you as a saint from a distance. I should have liked to have bowed myself down before you, and what secret tortures I suffered you can never know.”

Trembling, almost on his knees as a suppliant, Pierre spoke with passionate ardour. His gloomy face was lit up; it beamed with love. Blanche stretched out her hand towards him to bid him be silent. But the young officer had been silent too long, and the avowals with which his heart

was filled overflowed without his being able to check them.

“I entreat you,” he said, “to hearken to me. You must know the truth, for I can bear everything except your contempt. The day that I saw you for the first time it seemed to me that my mind, so long disturbed by I know not what delirium, recovered its strength. I cursed my sin, and would no more repeat it. Beneath your chaste look I blushed; I was wretched. Was it because you were so pure and so sweet that I loved you? Oh! how many times have I not cursed my degradation! Life would have been so beautiful and happy for me beside you. I dared not hope that I might one day become your husband. I had not so much pride. But you behaved favourably towards me, and I thought I might hope for a little of your friendship. It was already much for me to live beneath your eyes, in the radiance of your beauty, in the caress of your voice, in the intoxication of your smile, never to leave you, to serve you, and to adore you. But it was impossible. A word overheard, a look surprised might have revealed my secret to you. Voluntarily I doomed myself to exile. Ah! how grateful I was to you when you gave me the reliquary that had belonged to you—that you had touched. How precious to me was that dear souvenir! It has never left me. It was there on my breast; it is still there. And in the evening, in the solitude of my life, when I thought of home, of all the dear ones I had left behind, it was to it that I addressed all my wishes and all my hopes. I have never fallen asleep in the bivouac, the tent, or amidst the sands of the desert, without pressing this dear treasure to my lips. It seemed to me that it had retained something of you, and that it was a little of your heart that I had near me. Lying wounded on my pallet, burnt up by fever, delirious, I still clasped it as a talisman, and without a doubt it saved me. Ah! why did I not die! You would have wept for me; you would have retained a proud and tender remembrance of me. Whilst now, debased and degraded, I am the most wretched of beings. I adore you, and you—you——”

His face bore an expression of harrowing grief as he uttered these last words. A big tear rolled down his cheek,

and was lost in his moustache. Standing before her, pale, dressed in black, and with the trace of this glittering tear on his cheek, he appeared to her as he had done on the first day on which she had seen him. She shuddered; an irresistible power impelled her towards him; she opened her lips, and was about to speak. He divined her agitation, he held out his hands, exclaiming, "Blanche," in a tone of fervent hope.

But the young girl grew suddenly gloomy, sighed, and with a look indicated to him the Count and Sarah, who were advancing arm-in-arm towards them.

In a moment stern reality had resumed its sway over her. The outraged husband, the guilty wife, were there before her eyes, forbidding forgiveness. Pierre bowed his head; he understood that Sarah had just closed Blanche's heart to pardon by appearing as a living souvenir of sin. Walking slowly, sad and silent, he returned with the young girl towards the Chateau.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE next week all the guests at Canalheilles returned to Paris. The day of the wedding was drawing near. Blanche, accompanied by her uncle, had visited the Hotel de Cygne, and workmen had been called in to place that superb dwelling in a habitable condition. The young couple were to take up their quarters there for a few days, and then Séverac would leave for Africa, where his wife would probably rejoin him. This point had, however, remained *in nubibus*. Blanche when questioned had replied evasively. As to Séverac, when again sounded by the Count as to an exchange, he had rejected all proposals made to him, and had shown himself decided to return to his post. This obstinacy appeared inexplicable to the Count, and he remarked to Frossard:

"What the deuce does Séverac still want to go to Oran for? He will leave a wife whom he adores all alone after a

few days of married life for the pleasure of seeing the dirty burnouses of the Arabs again. I must admit that I do not understand it."

"What does Mademoiselle de Cygne think of it?" inquired Frossard, anxious not to compromise himself.

"She thinks the arrangement a suitable one."

"Well, General, what is there to prove that there is not some little plot beneath all this, and that the young couple have not the idea of visiting Algeria during their honeymoon? It is an admirable country. All who return from it say so. The soldier is king there, and when he is rich is almost a god into the bargain. The young wife in a palanquin reclining in Oriental style on silken cushions, with an escort of bronzed horsemen under the command of Séverac caracoling around, and with the palm-trees of an oasis and the burning sun of the desert as a background, is a scene sufficiently fairy-like."

"After all, it may be so," murmured the Count.

But in his heart he was not convinced. Repulsed by Frossard, he turned to Sarah. The Countess had shaken her head in a thoughtful manner, and after a few words, that might be easily interpreted either in an affirmative or in a negative sense, had shut herself up in her rooms with Mrs Stewart, who had just come to pass some weeks with her dear Sarah. For the rest, everything about Séverac's behaviour was strange.

His betrothed having returned to Paris, he remained at Bois-le-Roi. He came to Paris every day, but refused to take up his quarters there, leaving in the evening by the last train and returning to his mother's. He had not inhabited his rooms in Rue des Pyramides since his return from Algeria. Too many remembrances favourable to Sarah filled them. At every step he would have encountered her image. She would have forced herself upon his thoughts, and all that which recalled the past gave him horror. Moreover, he was afraid, lest she should hunt him up there.

In two weeks Sarah had greatly changed. Her face had grown thinner, and her features seemed drawn upwards, as though the workings of the single thought that continually

occupied her brain had contracted her facial muscles. There was a kind of wild look about her eyes. She suffered greatly. Séverac saw this, but he alone perceived it; for Sarah, with supreme energy, hid all her anguish, and, during the few hours in which she was obliged to brave the looks of those about her, was able to wear an impenetrable mask. The remainder of her time was passed in the little Oriental drawing-room in company with Mrs Stewart. Stretched upon a divan, her head buried in the cushions, she reflected, whilst that good lady read her favourite magazines or played games at patience and imbibed copious cups of tea. Sarah continually revolved in her mind the same problem, that of finding a means of breaking off the marriage. This was her sole thought, and in her aching head it returned incessantly, causing her intolerable agony. From time to time she rose and went to the window looking on to the garden of the Hotel. There, when the weather was fine, she would see Pierre and Blanche walking slowly, almost sadly, round the lawn become yellow beneath the autumn sun. She would then tear herself away from this sight, which caused her heart to beat almost to suffocation. Returning to Mrs Stewart, she would take the cards from her, and, seating herself upon a cushion, would spread them out upon the carpet, and, like the gypsy fortune-tellers whose cabalistic practices she had watched in her childhood, would seek to penetrate the future. Constantly the fatal predominance of spades foretold a death. She sought to know whose, but the cards remained silent; she could only read in them obscurity and mystery. Then she would rise, and without saying a word, with fixed look and set lips, would return to her divan and commence thinking again.

Her moral condition was truly frightful. Having concentrated all her life in her love, she sought to resist, to struggle, and to triumph for it. Cut off from love, deprived of him whom she adored, a serious phenomenon developed itself in her organisation, a kind of sensual fever unsettled it. Pierre was necessary to her. Her sleep was disturbed by frightful dreams. She would wake up with quivering nerves and limbs bathed in perspiration, perceiving

everything but incapable of moving, as though in a state of catalepsy.

She had the strength not to say anything to Mrs Stewart, fearing the remonstrances of the prudish Englishwoman. The latter, accustomed to Sarah's caprices, did not feel uneasy. She had said to herself as of old, "It is an electrical crisis," and had thought that this gloomy melancholy would pass away like a black cloud from the sky, and that a ray of sunlight would suddenly bring back fine weather. She awaited this philosophically.

The Count on his part was greatly occupied with the contractors for the repairs of the Hotel de Cygne, and with Frossard over the accounts of his guardianship. Besides, his happy nature allowed him to see the agreeable side of things. His niece's marriage kept him in a good humour, he teased Merlot and fostered insurrections against him. He gave wicked advice to Madeleine.

"You are too gentle," said he to the young girl; "and you encourage your father to tyrannise over you. Do not let yourself be led like a lamb."

"What my father does," answered Madeleine, "is from affection for me. Perhaps he exaggerates a little, but can I be angry with him for that? I lost my mother when a child, he had to bring me up, and to a rather rough soldier like himself the guardianship of a young girl presented itself in the shape of stern duty. He stands sentry over me. When anyone approaches he levels his bayonet and cries out, 'Keep your distance'; but his gruffness has its good side. I am known to be rich, and several young men have already paid me attention. I have been able to judge of their sincerity by their persistence. To be obliged to lay positive siege to a young girl in order to obtain her hand was a serious task. All have grown discouraged, and I concluded from this that they did not love me."

"All! no! Frossard, the heroic Frossard!"

"He alone has persisted," said Madeleine gaily; "he meets the sorties unflinchingly, he holds his own against the army of relief, no blow discourages him. Beaten, he returns to the assault, and so one of these days the fortress, in spite of its governor's resistance, will be forced to capitulate."

"It is the only capitulation that I shall sign with pleasure," exclaimed the General; "and if you want a plenipotentiary, my dear child, you may count upon me."

And exuberantly beaming, the Count would often say:

"I should like to have had both these children married the same day; that would have been charming. But Merlot is an old stupid who will never hear reason."

Greatly impressed as usual by the external aspect of things, the Count had imagined a brilliant ceremony; numerous guests, the church full of flowers and lighted tapers, and at the altar two white-veiled brides. It was a graceful picture, calculated to charm his courtly spirit. He had at first thought of giving a grand fête in honour of his niece's marriage, but he had encountered serious opposition on the part of Mademoiselle de Cygne.

Apparently filled again by her religious notions, Blanche had manifested the wish to retire for some days into a convent, for meditation and prayer. She had chosen a pious house situate in the Faubourg St Germain, and belonging to the Order of St Augustine. Great ladies were accustomed to retire there during Lent. It seemed, therefore, to the Count quite simple, and even in rather good taste, that his niece should carry out this project. He at once ordered a very fine silver crucifix that Mademoiselle de Cygne wished to present the convent with in recognition of the hospitality proffered to her. He hastened the drawing up of the marriage contract. Mademoiselle de Cygne, consulted by her uncle, announced her intention of having this so framed as to secure a community of possessions. Secretly admitting the possibility of a separation between Séverac and herself, she wished, whatever might happen, to secure to her husband an ample fortune. Even when thus foreseeing evil, she sought to benefit him whom she loved.

It was in Frossard's office and in presence of Blanche, that Séverac became aware of his betrothed's intentions. He rose abruptly, refusing the intended favour, and declared that he would not marry unless Mademoiselle de Cygne's fortune were settled on herself. Blanche on hearing Pierre protest in a prompt tone against the generous measures she

had wished to take, felt the blood rush to her face. She was ashamed of having thought for a single moment that Séverac could accept the gift of half her fortune. She was afraid she had offended him; she cast a timid look towards him and smiled sadly. Within her heart she approved of his conduct.

She listened, with eyes cast down, to the lengthy and flattering enumeration of her immense fortune, followed by the curt statement that the future husband in marrying retained his rights. She heard with emotion Frossard state, in order to explain the absence of fortune on his friend's part, that the young officer had, on the death of his father, renounced his inheritance in favour of his mother. She saw Pierre grave and thoughtful, taking part in this painful meeting in which everything was calculated to wound and afflict him. He was such as she had always dreamt of him, poor and proud. In a moment he became again the Séverac of other days; he who had wept with her and whom she had adored. All was blotted out; his crime, her grief. She gave way to the delicious charm of forgetfulness. She only returned to herself when Frossard, approaching her with a gallant air, announced that all was finished. Made-moiselle de Cygne, quite bewildered, once more found herself face to face with her uncle, Pierre, and the young notary. Full of regret she understood that the situation had not been instantaneously altered at her mere wish, and perceived that in the reality the obstacles would not be so easily removed as in the dreams. She addressed a few words of thanks to Frossard, and held out a hand to Séverac, which he scarcely dared clasp in his own. Then taking the Count's arm she left. The next day she shut herself up in the convent.

She hoped that the calm and silence of this pious house would act favourably upon her mind, and restore her all her moral strength. It was not so. Just as after excessive fatigue the body is enervated by the softness of a good bed, and cannot find rest in it, so in the immobility of cloistered existence Blanche only found an increase of her agitation. Amidst the bustle and incidents of worldly life she might succeed in stifling her thoughts. Face to face with herself, in the solitude of her cell, she found herself entirely aban-

doned to her recollections. She sought to pray. She tried to find her former happy ecstasies in the warm and perfumed shadow of the chapel. She strove to become absorbed in the idea of the Deity. She lifted up her soul to Heaven with passionate ardour. Continually it sank back to earth. Love had fettered its wings.

She wept bitterly over her lost calm. Since even at the foot of the altar she could not flee Pierre, she would be much more surely at his mercy when she should find herself with him. She sent for her confessor and opened her heart to him. The worthy priest reassured her by approving of her conduct. He pointed out to her a brighter future. Perhaps her husband would give her sufficiently substantial pledges of his re-elevation for her to forgive him. He commanded her not to abandon him to himself. He exhorted her to patience and mildness towards Sarah. Perhaps *Mademoiselle de Cygne* was destined to bring back this strayed sheep to the fold! For an entire day the young girl felt herself stronger and freer. But night brought back trouble to her mind. She regretted having shut herself up in this convent; she would like to have been able to pierce the walls with her eyes, and constantly follow *Séverac* and Sarah. She feared treachery. A supreme effort on Sarah's part might effect a triumph over Pierre's will. With agony she recalled the scene at which she had been present in the conservatory at *Canalheilles*. Sarah's burning words again resounded in her ears. She beheld her outstretched arms, her quivering lips, her eyes wandering from the intoxication of her senses. Her heart wrung, her hands damp with perspiration, *Blanche* suffered the tortures of jealousy. Then in vain she threw herself on her knees, and bade her thoughts soar above these earthly miseries and infamies. Her unsubmitive thoughts would still grovel. With horror *Blanche* saw herself sullied by her rival's impurity, and she shuddered and wept.

She had good cause for fear. Her departure had given Sarah great relief. Certain of no longer seeing Pierre and *Blanche* together for a week at least, she breathed again. It was a lull in the atrocious existence she had been leading for three weeks past. She left her apartments and sought

to come across Séverac. But since Mademoiselle de Cygne's departure the young officer no longer came to the Rue Saint-Honoré. He had alleged to the Count that he had matters of business to attend to, and Monsieur de Canalheilles had been satisfied with this excuse. For four days Sarah, on the watch from morning till night behind her window curtain, did not lose sight of the entrance door. A prey to impatience, she was not able to wait any longer. She must meet Pierre at any price. Under pretext of wanting some lace that she had left at Canalheilles, she took the morning train with Mrs Stewart and reached Bois-le-Roi. A carriage, ordered by telegram, was waiting for her. She went on to the Chateau in order not to astonish her companion, to whom she had told the same story as to the General, and after having breakfasted in the hunting lodge, waited on by the keeper's wife, she had herself driven to Madame Séverac's.

During the ride from Canalheilles to Bois-le-Roi, Sarah quivered at the thought of surprising Pierre alone, and of seizing on him without his being able to defend himself. The weather was delightful, and the Countess became very gay, chatting and laughing all the way. But on arriving she was seized with a sudden apprehension; supposing he were not with his mother! A rush of blood ascended from her heart to her face at this thought. But how could he be elsewhere? The stoppage of the carriage put an end to her anguish. She alighted with Mrs Stewart, rang at the gate, crossed the little garden with its carefully gravelled walks, and asked the servant, who came running forward cheerfully to receive the visitors, for Madame Séverac. The old lady appeared at the same moment on the threshold of her drawing-room. She ushered in the Countess with the easy grace of a woman who has lived for a long time in the best society. Sarah, who would have liked to open the doors, sound the walls, and seek everywhere for him whom she had come to find, had to put a good face on the matter, and chat pleasantly. At length, in the course of conversation, she was able to slip in these words:

"Is not the Major at Bois-le-Roi?"

"No, madame," answered Madame Séverac, "he has

gone to Paris, as usual. He is doubtless with the General."

As usual! And he had not been seen for more than a week! Where could he go? Perhaps he wandered around the convent in which Blanche was shut up. It seemed to Sarah that the day had become more gloomy, and that the atmosphere of this house, which she had been in such haste to reach, was suffocating. As sad as she had been gay on her arrival, she took leave of Madame Séverac and withdrew. On returning home she found the Count, who was waiting for her, and who kindly inquired about her journey. Then, as the most natural thing in the world, he added:

"Séverac called and asked me to give you his respectful compliments."

Sarah grew pale with anger. So he whom she had gone so far to seek might have been met with here, and yet she had had no presentiment of his coming. Was it that she loved less fervently? Formerly a secret voice warned her when the young officer was about to come. She resumed her watch, wishing to catch sight of Séverac, to seize him as he passed, to lead him into her own room, and there to have a final explanation with him. The next day she waited in vain for hours that seemed interminable. At length, on the eve of the marriage, Pierre arrived. He went straight to the room of the Count, with whom he remained closeted for some time.

Sarah, leaving Mrs Stewart, and without waiting to change her light silk dressing-gown, took up her position in ambush in the corridor by which Pierre in former days usually went out when he left the General. The passage was dark. Sarah, risking being surprised, remained there biting her lips, tapping impatiently with her little foot in its satin slipper, leaning against the wall, and vaguely hearing through the wainscot the voices of the two men talking. Her heart beat violently, she became completely unnerved. At length, at the end of a considerable time, the door opened, and Pierre came out alone.

He took several steps, and then stopped suddenly on finding himself face to face with Sarah. Carried away by the ardour of her desire, the Countess sprang towards him.

He wished to speak, to interrogate her. She placed a finger upon her lips with a strange smile. He divined the danger, and sought to escape from it. But she had seized him by the arm, and grasped it so that he could not get away from her. In the semi-darkness of the corridor he made an effort to free himself. She clasped him round the neck. He tried to push her away.

“Sarah, you are losing your senses!” he said, in a low voice, so much did he fear attracting anyone’s attention.

She raised a silken curtain, and dragging him almost by force, made him enter the Oriental saloon. He shuddered on finding himself there, he recognised the fatal room in which all seemed to be prepared for pleasure—where the divans stretched out low and soft, where the walls, covered with bright-hued pottery, dazzled the eyes, where voluptuous perfumes irritated the senses, and the murmur of water falling in the marble basin lulled the will to sleep. Mrs Stewart, magazine in hand, looked at Pierre and Sarah with amazement, without daring to ask a question.

“Leave us alone for a moment, if you please,” said the Countess.

The elderly Englishwoman rose to her feet, letting all her magazines roll on to the carpet, and exclaimed, with an expression of aggrieved modesty:

“But can you think of such a thing, my dear? What is the meaning of this?”

Sarah darted a fiery glance at her friend, and shrugging her shoulders, resolved no longer to mince matters, cried in a ringing voice:

“I love him! And I am his, that is all. Go.”

Mrs Stewart drew back as though she had seen the fiend appear before her. Overcome with inexpressible bewilderment she went out, stumbling as she did so against the furniture, and closed the door behind her. As soon as Sarah found herself alone with Pierre she darted towards him. The sleeves of her dressing-gown fell back, revealing her beautiful bare arms.

“It is for to-morrow,” she said, with a bewildered air.
“To-morrow. But as long as all is not over, I have the hope

of seeing you recede. You have not the right, if you are an honest man, to abandon me."

And as Séverac remained still and silent, submitting impassably to this terrible onslaught aimed at his conscience,

"Oh! heart of marble!" exclaimed Sarah furiously. "Can nothing move you? But you have forgotten all, then? Look at these walls, do they recall nothing to you? Does this subdued light awaken no tender memory? You loved me, however. Your lips have told me so with kisses more plainly than in words. And you wish to abandon me, when you know that it will surely kill me. But look at me then, I am surely worth more than your contempt?"

With an impulse of superb wantonness she pulled out her comb and threw apart her dressing-gown. Her golden hair streamed over her snowy shoulders. In the rosy light of the room, with its brilliant walls and bright-hued hangings, she was beautiful enough to damn an angel. Her blue eyes, surrounded by a dark ring that heightened the voluptuous pallor of her face, glittered, whilst her moist lips shaped themselves as for a kiss. The whole of her ardent being, bent upon triumph, exhaled an irresistible seduction.

Séverac, dazzled, closed his eyes to see no more. But she, eager to move him, drew near, and enveloping him in the warm perfume that emanated from her, whispered in his ear:

"Have pity on me, do not sacrifice me when you can save me. I love you so. You know well that I have made all things subordinate to you, and that naught else save you exists for me on earth. Where will you find a woman so much attached to you? Oh! I would like to tear you from this cold and calculating world. Why cannot I take you in my arms and bear you away? Let us go together, to live in some retired spot without care for others. Oh! to be free to never leave you more, to worship you without restraint, and to make myself your slave! Come, come, let us fly!"

She repeated these last words to him in twenty different ways, searching him with her glance, clinging to his breast, maddened, carried away, forgetful of everything, ready to

THE COUNTESS SARAH

ruin herself irremediably if he wished it. He remained frozen amidst her embraces, deaf to her supplications.¹⁷

"You owe me your life, it is mine since I have sacrificed my own to you," resumed Sarah, seeking to touch the young officer's heart in another fashion. "Are we not indissolubly bound to one another? Let us go, you have not the right to abandon me. And if you remain I am lost."

Sarah drew back a step. She looked at him and saw him calm and resolved. She made a maddened gesture, and pressing her hands to her head, which seemed on the point of bursting, began to pace round the room like a caged wild beast. She halted before a glass and perceived her loosened garments, and blushed with shame; tears of anger rose to her eyes, and bounding towards Pierre:

"Wretch!" she exclaimed, "away with you. You sicken me; you are the vilest of mankind!"

Séverac's face flushed deeply, and he smiled bitterly. "I prefer," he said, "your insults to your prayers. They are less painful to me."

Sarah returned to him soft and tearful. "Have I hurt you?" asked she, as if she no longer remembered the words she had just uttered. "Forgive me, I know not what I am doing or saying. How could I think of vexing you—you whom I would like to make so happy! Forget everything except that I adore you. And do not abandon me for that Blanche, who does not love you, who will never know how to love you."

She seized the young officer by the shoulders, and looking gravely into his face, added:

"Reflect! And resolve wisely, for know this: at any price I will have you mine! Now go!"

Lifting the silken curtain she pointed out to Séverac the way by which he could retire. After listening for a moment to the young officer's footsteps, she went to the door of her bedroom, and opening it, beckoned Mrs Stewart to her. She then stretched herself upon the divan, her eyes fixed, her features relaxed, crushed, without saying a word. Her old friend, still under the stunning influence of the revelation so abruptly made to her, hovered

about her uneasily, and seeing her motionless as though dead, ventured to utter her name softly, and then, finding she did not answer, to place her head upon her shoulder. Sarah turned and gazed fixedly at the old Englishwoman.

"Well, my dear," said Mrs Stewart softly, "are you a little more calm? What you just told me, Sarah, is really most extravagant, and I can scarcely believe that a woman so well bred as yourself could give way to such shocking manifestations."

"It is all true," replied Sarah, in mournful tones. "My poor Stewart, do you remember the time when I complained gaily of never having felt my heart beat? It beats now to the point of breaking. And I suffer cruelly."

"But, my dear child, the Count, your husband?" exclaimed the old Englishwoman, quite scandalised.

"I set all at naught, I braved everything when I loved. There is no longer anyone in existence for me except my lover."

Mrs Stewart raised her hands in despair to heaven. A lover! Good gracious! her dear child spoke of a lover! Such charming horrors were to be found, then, elsewhere than in magazines? She sat down at the edge of the divan, and taking Sarah's fevered hand said, with Puritanic gravity:

"My dear love, I beg of you to come to yourself; if you have been guilty of sin you must atone for it. No one knows of it. Your husband suspects nothing—is it not so? This renders the task easy for you. Do not again see him for whom you have lost yourself. Return to the right path, to your duty. Forget——"

"I may forget, perhaps, when I am dead," said Sarah, rising suddenly, "but never so long as I live. Believe me, my dear, good Stewart, that if anyone could have made me change my resolution it would have been you, the best and most devoted of women."

Stewart, quite upset, burst into tears and positively bellowed. She opened her arms to her dear child and clasped her to her heart.

"Ah! Heavens! darling," she stammered, "what pain you give me. But what do you mean to do?"

"To go away."

"But with whom?"

"With him or with you. Whatever happens I shall disappear. I trust that you will not repulse me when I have no other support but yours to reckon on."

"Oh, Sarah! But is this possible?"

"Listen," said the Countess, "I am going to pack my trunks. You will announce your departure for to-morrow after the ceremony, and this evening you will send away your luggage and my own. You will take it yourself to the Hotel du Louvre. It can await us there."

And closing Stewart's lips with an imperious glance, Sarah passed into her room. The good old lady, scared and bewildered, and with her long curls hanging in disorder on either side of her cheeks, followed her, and hardly knowing which way to turn, looked on whilst Sarah ransacked her wardrobe. The Countess left the splendid necklace that Blanche had given her on her marriage and the jewels that the Count had presented her with in a coffer. She would only take away from that house the clothes necessary for a journey of a few days. She placed her keys in an antique bronze cup, and having arranged everything seemed calmer. She turned towards Mrs Stewart, whose look of consternation must have presaged a misfortune to the merest stranger, and spoke to her gently, begging her to feign a little in order not to betray her.

"You will not be very unhappy, if I take you with me, to find your old Sarah again?" said she, affecting a gaiety she was far from feeling. "We will travel like a pair of wanderers, we will go round the world this time."

Then, hearing the sound of steps in the little chamber that served as an anteroom,

"Take care, someone is coming," she exclaimed; "put on a less mournful face."

The Count entered, with his hat and gloves in his hand. He appeared vexed to find Sarah not yet dressed.

"What, dear, are you not ready?" said he. "Have you forgotten that we were to go to the convent to settle the final arrangements for to-morrow with Blanche?"

Sarah's face contracted for a moment, but in a perfectly natural tone she answered :

"It is true, I had forgotten it. But it is a matter of two minutes only. I will slip on a dress and I am at your service. Chat in the meanwhile with Mrs Stewart, who has a headache. She has been crying so, poor dear, at the thought of leaving us to-morrow evening."

"That is why I see all these boxes ready?" remarked the Count. "What! my dear Mrs Stewart, are you leaving us so suddenly?"

And as the Englishwoman, overcome, again burst into tears, he continued :

"But why do you not remain? The Countess is so pleased to have you about her, and you have only been here a fortnight."

Mrs Stewart, obliged to tell a falsehood, stated that she was expected by her mother's family in Scotland. The Count, as a well-bred man, fearing to be importunate, ceased to press her to remain. A few minutes later his brougham was bearing him, in company with Sarah, towards the Convent of the Ladies of the Visitation.

The convent, situate in the Rue de Madame, is an old house dating from the time of Louis the Thirteenth. It stands between a courtyard and a garden. A lofty archway, supported by stone pillars with dusty ivy covering a part of the walls, gives access to the cool and gloomy courtyard. A flight of four steps leads to an entrance-hall, whence a glimpse is caught of the green and shady garden, full of the song of birds. To the left is a large parlour with oaken panels, blackened by time, and a ceiling intersected by beams painted blue and studded with stars. Pictures of religious subjects, magnificent gifts from the faithful, hang on the walls. At the farther end is a white altar with golden mouldings, covered with costly lace and adorned with silver vessels of rich workmanship. It is here that the sisters celebrate the festival of Corpus Christi. On ordinary occasions the few visitors who present themselves are received here. It was in this severe-looking parlour, where everything speaks of divine adoration, and a dim religious light steals through the stained-

glass windows, that the Count, Sarah, and Blanche met.

The Count saw his niece for the first time for a week. He found her pale and fagged. Not suspecting the young girl's mental trouble, he felt uneasy about her health. He whispered to Sarah :

"It seems to me that Blanche is greatly changed. She was wrong to shut herself up for a week in this cold and gloomy convent. Let us hope she is not ill !"

Sarah slightly shrugged her shoulders, and read with stern joy upon the young girl's face the traces of tortures undergone. She suffered then, also, this favoured one ! She felt the rebound of all her rival's woes. Her triumph was at the same time a martyrdom.

"Shall we take you home with us this evening ?" asked the Count of Mademoiselle de Cygne.

"No," replied Blanche. "I wish to remain here until to-morrow morning."

The idea of passing the evening at the Hotel de Canalheilles with Sarah was unbearable to her. She preferred the anguish of solitude, the feverish expectation of this important day in her silent cell, to the painful efforts that she would have had to make to show herself smiling and joyful before the Count.

"Well, I will speak to the lady-superior," said Monsieur de Canalheilles, "and arrange everything for to-morrow."

He went out, and the two women remained face to face amidst the solemn silence of the parlour. They looked at one another, Blanche weak and downcast, Sarah strong and threatening.

"It is for to-morrow," said the Countess, "you have only a single night to come to a determination. Have you reflected in your solitude ?"

"I have suffered, I have wept, and I have prayed," answered Blanche.

"And have your resolutions changed ?"

"No."

"You persist despite my prayers, despite your own fears ?"

"In spite of all."

"You, so pious, you do not hesitate to rob me of the man whom I love?" exclaimed Sarah, losing all restraint, and drawing herself up threateningly before Mademoiselle de Cygne.

"I hinder you from publicly dishonouring the husband whom you have sworn to respect."

Mademoiselle de Cygne had spoken without raising her voice. Her eyes, riveted on one of the pictures hanging against the wall, were fixed and glittering as if she had been in ecstasy before some celestial vision. Sarah's glance followed that of the young girl. In a black wooden frame was a fine canvas of the Venetian school. The Magdalen, bent humbly in the dust before the Son of God, was wiping the Saviour's feet with her long golden hair. The disciples, ranged around their Master, witnessed this act of humility on the part of the repentant sinner, and praised her contrition. A pale light played upon Mary's sublime face, and lit up her golden tresses. By a strange coincidence there was an astonishing resemblance between this admirably painted head and that of Sarah.

The Countess with a single glance took in the whole picture; she understood Blanche's secret thought. Mentally the young girl was comparing the repentance of the woman, since become a saint, with the sin into which Sarah sought desperately to plunge anew, and from the bottom of her soul she was crying to her, "Do likewise; repent, and you will rise again, stronger and greater."

A frown furrowed Sarah's brow.

"Repent, that is it, is it not? Renounce him whom I adore?" said she. "No, no; I am not one of those who repent and who renounce. I persist, whatever may be the cost. Do not endeavour to deceive me with your hypocritical pity, your exhortations filled with duplicity. You do not seek my redemption, my salvation; you merely want my lover. Take care! in the end I shall lose patience. You do not know what you are about in resisting me. Be prudent!"

She paused for a moment, and then with horrible irony continued:

"You were on the point of taking the veil formerly;

well, take it now. You are in a convent, why don't you stop here?"

And as Blanche made no answer to these angry words she added:

"For the last time, will you give up this marriage?"

The Count's footsteps were audible outside on the flags of the entrance hall. Sarah understood that she had only a single moment to force *Mademoiselle de Cygne* to a decision. She drew near her and gripped her hands till she almost crushed them, seeking to sway or bend this mild but resolute being. Then desperate, seeing that she would obtain nothing, she leant towards her rival as though she were kissing her.

"You are positively bent upon marrying, then?" she murmured, in a tone that made Blanche shiver. "Well, so be it; but beware of being a widow!"

And with an angry gesture she withdrew, followed by the Count.

CHAPTER XIX

FROM that moment forward Sarah ceased to restrain herself, and all her natural violence returned. During the night preceding the wedding she paced up and down her room for hours with an irregular stumbling step, talking aloud and breaking forth into threats. Nothing remained of the polished charming Sarah such as education had formed. The *Zingara* appeared anew with all her undisciplined instincts and savage passions. Hatred took the place of love in her heart, and she longed with all the strength of her being to revenge herself. For the first time in her life worthy Mrs Stewart, who was shut up with her, lost her English apathy. Frightened by the view of this furious grief, and detecting signs of madness in Sarah's eyes, she did all she could to calm her and make her listen to reason; but she only exasperated her the more.

The young wife answered her friend's affectionate and politic advice with exclamations of rage. She did not

discuss, she blasphemed. Tortured by jealousy, her breast had become a furnace, as it were, and confused noises filled her head. At one moment she rolled on the floor in a horrible nervous attack, and beat her forehead against the boards as if she were desirous of destroying herself. Delirious, writhing in spasms, there was nothing human about her for several hours. But the very violence of this attack ultimately conduced to a little calmness, and then crouching with her head on her friend's knees, with her eyes staring fixedly, and her skin burning, she remained crushed by the fever that consumed her till the morning. She sobbed, calling upon Pierre, and imploring him to return to her, as if he were able to hear her. Mrs Stewart vainly begged her to go to bed, but she seemed deaf; she only heard the inner voices which persistently spoke to her, inspiring her with dangerous plans.

The worthy old lady judged the situation to be very serious, and she had the presentiment of a misfortune. She considered Sarah to be capable of some act of despair which might result in her ruin; and she even asked herself if it were not her duty to warn the Count of his wife's alarming condition. But by warning Monsieur de Canaillelles she would open his eyes, and cause Sarah's ruin more surely even than she could cause it herself. The dawn surprised them thus; side by side, with haggard faces and disordered attire. Sarah seemed to recover a little reason, and rising to her feet she approached the window. Gazing on the pale gleam which was lighting up the dark sky, she heaved a sigh, and muttered: "This is the day." Then she took a few chance steps across the room and paused, reflecting.

"Come, my dear child, I beg you," said Mrs Stewart, "go to bed, if only for an hour; you look terribly haggard, and you won't be presentable."

Sarah nodded in token of acquiescence, and allowed herself to be undressed like a child. Watched by Mrs Stewart, she lay in bed, awake, but apparently calm, until eight o'clock. Then as the house became full of noise and motion she wished to rise again. She was now fairly livid, and Mrs Stewart preferred not to let the maid enter the room, for

fear the young wife's frightful condition should be remarked and give rise to gossip. So she dressed her herself, adorned her for the ceremony, applied some rouge to her pale cheeks, and by dint of tenderness at last elicited from her a dreamy smile.

"I am like a condemned criminal being dressed for the scaffold," muttered Sarah, and then she became gloomy and anxious again.

At nine o'clock Mademoiselle de Cygne arrived, for it had been arranged that she should dress at the Hotel. Contrary to custom, she had not chosen to be married on two separate occasions, one day at the Mayor's and next day at the church. She feared some forlorn effort on Sarah's part. She knew that she was threatened, and wished to decrease the chances of peril. The abandoned mistress must not have too much time for reflection. At a quarter to ten o'clock Pierre arrived in full dress, and the bride and bridegroom then started off for the Mayor's with the Count and their witnesses. The Countess was to wait at home until the party returned to fetch her for the ceremony at the Madeleine.

During this interval Sarah no longer seemed conscious of her actions, but walked about as in a dream. She started on hearing eleven o'clock strike, and then exclaimed, "It is all over! they are married!" And yet, as is usual with women, the religious ceremony was in her eyes the more important of the two. She shuddered when she heard the bridal landau roll into the courtyard, but, led by Mrs Stewart, she went downstairs. She let herself be placed in a carriage, and only partially recovered her senses when she perceived the church. She felt a pang at her heart. It was the same scene that had met her gaze when she came here in her bridal attire but two years previously. The blue sky extended above the portico and the grey stone colonnade; the same inquisitive crowd was gathered on the steps, the same carpet stretched to the middle of the nave, and through the open doorway there again appeared the altar, all aglow with lighted tapers, while from the organ a solemn march resounded above the throng inside.

How many events had occurred since that day, recent as

it was ! How much joy and grief, struggling and despair ! Bent over her chair, Sarah tried to absorb herself in meditation. She ardently begged Heaven to cast a ray of light on her troubled mind. She felt less certain of her right. Had there only been some external token, some material sign which might have been interpreted as an omen, a word from the priest applicable to her secret agony, she would have abandoned her vengeance, renounced her hatred, and have sacrificed herself. But nothing struck her eyes. The stone saints remained motionless on their pedestals, the stained-glass windows were unilluminated by any heavenly ray ; all remained in shade. And Sarah only beheld Séverac escaping from her and becoming the husband of another to whom he swore eternal fidelity. She no longer hesitated. Heaven itself seemed to be upon her side. The die was cast. And in the depths of her heart she cried, "He shall not be yours ! You have robbed me of my lover ! I will take your husband from you !" She had found fresh strength. Her nerves, distended to the point of snapping, sustained her. She was able to smile. She braved the horrible trial of the congratulations in the vestry, and returned home, to all appearance calm, but really a prey to one of the most frightful tempests that ever raged in human heart.

The Count had only renounced giving a fête in honour of his niece's marriage on condition of entertaining the more intimate family friends at lunch after the nuptial ceremony. A choice company had accordingly assembled round the bride and bridegroom in the grand reception rooms of the Hotel de Canalheilles.

"It is not a numerous assemblage," said Pompéran, "but it is select."

"The cream of society," added La Liviniere. And satisfied with this expression of opinion the two young men went off towards the sideboard for a glass of champagne.

The Count, who was perfectly happy, strolled here and there, introducing Séverac to such of his guests as did not know him, and exclaiming, with overflowing delight : "The son of my dearest friend ! He becomes my

nephew by this marriage, but he was already my adopted child !”

Frossard, who was greatly agitated, divided his time between Mademoiselle Merlot, who had acted as her friend's bridesmaid, and the Countess de Canalheilles, whose pallor frightened him. Sarah no longer took the trouble to feign and compel her wearied lips to smile. She showed herself as she was—overcome by the fever consuming her, and crushed by perpetual sleeplessness. This beautiful, captivating young woman, once so much admired, was now but an object of pity for those who looked at her attentively. She had aged twenty years in a fortnight. Seated in an arm-chair, with her back turned to the window, for the light hurt her eyes, she remained listening carelessly to the talk around her.

“What are the happy couple's intentions ?” asked Mrs Smarden. “Do they travel, or remain here ?”

“Oh ! Honeymoon tours have quite gone out of fashion,” replied Pompéran. “That is the old style altogether.”

“In my time,” said Merlot dryly, “people found that little spell of liberty delightful. But it would seem that tastes alter. What was in vogue formerly seems ridiculous nowadays.”

“Let us understand each other,” La Liviniere retorted. “Ridiculous, no, but inconvenient, yes. To go off and live in hotels when you have a comfortable home awaiting you, is by no means a practical course. For myself, if I were in Séverac's place, I should declare that I meant to travel, but in reality I should shut myself up with my wife in that handsome Hotel de Cygne. What a pleasant honeymoon, what a delightful tête-à-tête in the midst of all those masterpieces !”

“Well, for my own part,” declared Mrs Smarden, “I should hardly show myself loving in a museum. I should be too absent-minded.”

“Oh, the surroundings are of little importance when a man loves his wife,” said Pompéran. “And that is Séverac's position. Look at them ! Is it possible to find a better-matched pair ?”

Blanche and Pierre were going round the reception rooms together. They were about to leave. Sarah abruptly rose to her feet, and clenched her teeth with such violence that they grated. She was seized with a nervous trembling. Walking side by side, with something sad and almost supplicating in their attitude, the young couple slowly approached her. She awaited them firmly, gave them a gloomy look, and acknowledged their bow with a slight inclination of the head. Not a word was exchanged. But Sarah's eyes followed them to the door, and then, as they disappeared, she hastened to the window. Their brougham, drawn by a pair of horses decked with white satin favours, stood waiting in the courtyard. They took their seats, the door was shut, and then the vehicle rolled rapidly off under the vaulted entrance to the mansion. All became dark before Sarah's eyes; and as she sought for some support, her hand rested on the jamb of the door leading to her own room. She dragged herself thither, and sank on to a seat, where she remained inert, unable to move a limb, but suddenly endowed with full perception of mind.

As physical strength abandoned her, intellectual vigour returned. Her heart was rent asunder, and she said to herself that it was all over, that no more hope was left to her. He whom she adored was gone. He was the husband of another woman. The memory of herself might for a time separate him from his wife; but would not their hearts be fatally impelled to forget her? The beautiful, tender-hearted young wife would take the place of the aged and fading mistress. And sooner or later Blanche would fall into Pierre's arms. Into his arms! At this thought she suffered so terribly that she hoped she was about to die. But this favour was not granted her; fresh pangs were in reserve for her.

She pictured the young couple walking side by side, their arms around each other, she heard the murmur of their voices, the twittering sound of their kisses. And all her anger returned to her. Was she to allow this Blanche—who had robbed her of all earthly delight—to enjoy her triumph? Was she to treat her with clemency after

threatening her? Vengeance was so easy! She rose, and opening a little cabinet in ebony, encrusted with mother-of-pearl, hastily fumbled in a drawer, and drew a small packet of letters from it. These letters were the few sad answers which Pierre had sent her while he was in Algeria. One of them only need be placed under the Count's eyes and she would be revenged!

Ah! the outraged husband would unfailingly wreak punishment on the man who had robbed him of his honour. She remembered the Count's increasing anger on the night he had surprised her at Canalheilles. She again saw him clenching his fists convulsively. The brave soldier, the proud nobleman, would not hesitate to wash away the stain cast upon his name by his wife's lover. Blood would flow. To think that she might wrest from Blanche the man she had stolen—make her a widow when she was hardly a bride—what vengeance it would be! Atrocious joy shone upon Sarah's face. She held Pierre at her mercy. Either he should consent to follow her, or she would hand him over to her husband.

Taking up a sheet of paper she hastily wrote these words:

“I am the most guilty and miserable of women. I have gone for ever. Forget me.—SARAH.”

She closed the envelope, and addressed it to the Count. And then, having cut off all retreat, she wrapped herself in a long cloak, threw a mantilla over her head, and went off by way of the little Oriental saloon. She cast a softened look upon this apartment where she had experienced so much happiness and so much suffering. And reaching the landing she looked round her for someone to whom she might confide her letter. At that moment Colonel Merlot passed by on his way from the billiard-room to the principal drawing-room, and she went towards him.

Alarmed by the Countess's disappearance, which coincided with the departure of the bridal pair, Frossard was on the watch. He had had serious fears for several days past. Being fully acquainted with the struggle which was in progress, he had followed each phase of it with extreme

attention. Sarah's physiognomy alarmed him. A catastrophe seemed to hover in the air. He divined its proximity, and determined to do all in his power to arrest it. He prowled round about the Countess's apartments, opening his ears to every sound, and attentively watching every suspicious movement. Partially concealed by a door-curtain, he at last espied the Countess as she left the Oriental saloon, and approached Colonel Merlot.

"I have to absent myself for a few minutes. If the Count asks for me, my dear Colonel," she said, "pray give him this note."

Thereupon she disappeared in the direction of the servants' staircase. Frossard did not hesitate for one second. He had a clear perception of the situation, and foresaw that something dramatic was on the point of occurring. Sarah had written to her husband and was about to leave the house. What could she have told him? The truth, undoubtedly. And the truth meant Séverac's ruin. Full of anxiety, Frossard regretted that he was not endowed with ubiquity, so as to be able to warn Pierre and follow the Countess at the same time. But the letter? He must at any cost prevent it from reaching its destination. And so he sprang upon Merlot, caught him by the arm, and dragging him into a deserted boudoir, exclaimed:

"The gravest interests are at stake, Colonel. Madame de Canalheilles has just handed you a letter for the Count. It must not be given to him."

Merlot became purple, and his eyes seemed as if starting out of his head. "I have never been found wanting, sir, in any mission that has been confided to me," he replied.

"Well, it will be the first time then. It is never too late for the brave," rejoined Frossard excitedly. "You must give me that letter, Colonel. And quickly; for minutes mean years at the present moment."

"Do you know what you ask of me?" cried the querulous old officer.

"I ask the life and honour of those you love."

"But——"

Frossard became angry. The Countess was gaining

ground during this discussion, and she might escape him. So, showing Merlot his arms, the strength of which he had previously proved to him, he said :

“ Give me the letter, Colonel, or I shall have to take it from you.” Then suddenly changing his tone, he added : “ But, no ! I don’t threaten. It would be useless to do so with a brave man like yourself I appeal to your good heart, for at the bottom you have a good one. By resisting my appeal you will simply cause an irreparable misfortune——”

Moved by the young notary’s warmth of manner, Merlot coughed, tugged furiously at his moustaches, and finally drawing the fatal missive from his pocket, held it out to Frossard, exclaiming :

“ There ! ”

The notary raised a cry of joy, pressed Merlot to his heart as if he meant to stifle him, and replied : “ We shall end by loving each other ! ” Then he at once darted down the staircase, leaving his old enemy altogether upset, and uncertain whether he ought to rejoice or feel angry.

On reaching the street, Frossard looked round him, and perceived Sarah some three hundred paces ahead of him, going down the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, in the direction of the Rue Royale. He began to run, careless of what passers-by might think, and speedily shortened the distance between them. But he did not approach too near her. He followed in her wake, gliding along close to the shop-fronts, so that she might not notice him if she chanced to look round. And as he walked on he nervously asked himself : “ Where can she be going ? ”

She darted along with the rapid pace of a person in great haste, and turned into the Rue Royale. Frossard began to feel exceedingly apprehensive, for at the end of this wide thoroughfare there stretched the Place de la Concorde, and then came the Seine. He had a horrible vision of the muddy water rolling noisily under the bridges, and suddenly rising in spray, as a falling body rent it for one moment in twain. He shuddered. Had Sarah determined upon death, in her despair ? Had this elegant, distinguished woman reflected how frightful and ignoble this public

suicide would be? He drew nearer to her. Either by reason of fatigue or preoccupation, her pace had gradually become slower and less regular; and now she paused from time to time, as if she hesitated to go forward, or as if her strength were failing her.

However, she at last turned round the corner of the Rue Royale, and proceeded along the Rue de Rivoli. Frossard breathed again. She crossed the street in the direction of the Tuileries gardens; but as she reached the railing she carried her hand to her forehead, and seemed overcome with giddiness. She took a few more steps forward, staggering, and then uttering a cry of pain, stretched out her arms as if she felt that she were about to fall. With a bound, Frossard reached her side, caught hold of her, and met the expiring glance of her half-closed eyes. She had yet the strength to stammer, "To the Hotel de Cygne," and then she fainted. Frossard did not lose his head. He particularly wished to prevent a crowd assembling, and to avoid the questions of the police. Fortunately, an empty cab was passing, and he hailed it. None too soon, however, for an inquisitive workman had already stopped short, exclaiming:

"Dear me, what's up? A lady taken bad!"

"It is my wife, sir. A mere nothing; a little weakness," replied Frossard, and he respectfully veiled the Countess's face with her lace mantilla.

"There is a chemist's shop in the next street," said the workman.

"Thanks, we live close by," replied Frossard. "Driver, to the Faubourg Saint-Honoré."

But on hearing the notary give her husband's address, Sarah opened her eyes, and made a movement as if she meant to throw herself out of the vehicle. Frossard hesitated for an instant, and then reflected: "Bah! after all, I shall be there, so as to prevent a misfortune" Whereupon, leaning towards the driver, he altered his instructions, saying to him:

"No, first of all, to the Rue de Bellechasse."

Sarah thanked him with a gesture, and then leaning back in the vehicle, she seemed to fall asleep. She was only

recalled to consciousness when the cab stopped. She drew herself up, and alighted with Frossard's assistance. The brougham which had brought the young couple home stood unharnessed in the courtyard. As the bell resounded in the silence of the staircase, a footman appeared on the steps and ushered Sarah into the house. With an imperious gesture, she bade Frossard remain outside. She crossed the hall, and found every door open before her, as if she had been expected. On the first floor she paused, and having restrained the violent beating of her heart, she boldly entered the little drawing-room where Blanche had spent the sad hours following upon her father's death.

A moment later, a door at the farther end of the room opened, and the young bride appeared, still attired in her white robe. She approached the Countess and calmly asked

"What have you come here for?"

"I have come for your husband," cried Sarah, with a defiant glance.

"What, even now?" asked Blanche.

"Yes, now, and always," rejoined Sarah, in a tone of rage. "He is mine! and I will have him!"

So saying, she took a step towards the door by which Blanche had entered the room. But the young bride darted in front of it, and standing in a resolute attitude and extending her arms, she cried:

"You shall not see him!"

"Ah! ah! Are you then so very much afraid that I shall wrest him from you?" asked Sarah, with bitter joy.

"So you are not so sure of your power over him?"

Blanche's eyes flashed. She suddenly withdrew from in front of the door, and opened it, at the same time motioning Sarah forward. And then, in a tone of perfect confidence, she uttered the one word, "Enter!" The Countess passed out, and Blanche remained cold and gloomy in the little drawing-room, allowing her rival to approach her husband alone.

Pierre stood near a window, waiting. He was in the Marquis de Cygne's bedchamber, which had been left just as it was on the day of his death, with its stained-glass

windows only admitting a subdued light, with its broad carved and colonnaded bedstead, its venerable cabinets, precious paintings and its old Flemish tapestry hanging on the walls. Sarah felt intimidated as she entered this room where everything was so funereal-like and solemn. She realised the monstrosity of the final attempt she was about to make. She paused as disconcerted as if she had stood on the threshold of some holy spot, and feared committing sacrilege. But such was the despairing strength of her love that she did not retreat. Lacking the courage to speak, and the will to retire, she sank into an arm-chair and wept.

Pierre came towards her, and he asked in a voice, the gentleness of which made her quiver as if it had been a caress,

“Why are you weeping, and why are you here?”

“I weep because I love you, and because you make me suffer,” she replied. “I am here because I cannot live without you.”

“I would give everything in the world to spare you from suffering,” he rejoined, “but you know that I no longer belong to myself.”

“Did you belong to yourself?”

“You yourself disposed of me. Was I not obliged to consent to everything in view of saving you?”

“Well, 'twas a useless effort,” she cried, half frantic. “I am more surely lost than ever. A letter from me has acquainted my husband with the truth. He knows that I have gone off, never to return to him. And now that I have only you left to love and protect me, I have come to see if I shall appeal to your feelings of honour in vain.”

“My honour?” repeated Pierre. “How shall I show most respect for it? By abandoning a woman who bears my name, or by refusing to elope with the wife of my friend, benefactor, and second father? My conduct was infamous when bewitched by your glances, and maddened by your beauty I forgot all I ought to have remembered. But that shall not occur again, and come what may, I will not follow you.”

“Take care!” said Sarah, who was exasperated by

Pierre's resistance. "I have not yet told the Count everything. He does not know the name of the man he has to punish. But I have your letters, and if you do not come with me at once I will send them to him!"

She had taken the packet from her pocket, and was brandishing it like a weapon. By stretching out his hand he might easily have wrested the letters from her and have destroyed them. But he did not even try to do so. He merely laughed lugubriously.

"What admirable love," he cried, "is that which threatens! What touching tenderness is that which strikes and kills! You say that you love me! What would it be then if you hated me?"

"Oh! can you not see that I am becoming mad, that I am dying? Pierre, in pity, mercy, come. Oh! if you do not fly with me he will kill you."

"Be it so. You know that death does not frighten me. I sought it, but it would not take me. I shall be indebted to you for it now; and, indeed, I suffer so much that I shall be grateful to you."

"Pierre!" cried Sarah, again extending her arms imploringly towards him.

"Farewell," said he. "After that threat of yours we have nothing more to say to each other." And he left the room with a firm step and without once looking round.

Sarah wanted to cry out, but her tongue clove to her palate, she saw the room whirl round her with horrible rapidity, and she fell on her knees clutching hold of an arm-chair. A moment later she felt that someone had raised her again and gently seated her on the chair. But she remained inert as if she were at the brink of a precipice. However, she heard a voice speaking near her, a voice that was full of grief and supplication. Then as she raised her eyes she perceived Blanche.

"Why do you wish his ruin, if you have loved him?" asked the young bride. "What joy can his death and mine procure you?"

"There are but remnants and ruins left in my life," replied Sarah. "The misfortunes of others must equal mine. May everything crumble and fall! What right have you

to be happy when I am broken down by such grief? Oh! to know that he belongs to another! That he is happy with her, through me! What incessant torture shall I have to endure! But do you not love him, then, that you fail to understand me?"

Blanche drew herself erect, she seemed to be taller, her eyes sparkled and her brow brightened.

"Love is not like that for me," she said; "I would sacrifice everything for him I love. If it is the thought that he belongs to me that makes you suffer, I can calm your jealousy. Renounce your plans for ruining him, and I will consent to an eternal separation. He shall go away, and I will not follow him. You wish to destroy and rend everything. Well, at least you will have destroyed my future and rent my heart. But I shall not complain if at this price I can only succeed in softening you and saving him."

Sarah gazed into the depths of Blanche's eyes "You would consent never to see him again?" she asked.

In a gold frame at the head of the marquis's bedstead there hung the portrait of a woman who was faintly smiling. Blanche stretched her arm towards it, and without hesitation, cried:

"I swear it by my mother's memory!"

Her tone of voice was expressive of sincerity. Sarah shook her head, and then gravely rejoined:

"You are better than I am. That is why he loves you"

Blanche was trembling now, and she no longer dared to speak. The expression of her rival's face had suddenly changed. The silence became oppressive. Sarah fingered the packet of letters mechanically, and under the touch of her nervous hands the ribbon binding it was loosened, and one of the fatal missives became separated from the others. She opened it and began to read it. It was full of deep melancholy. Pierre bitterly reproached himself with his sin and wished to atone for it with his life. He begged Sarah not to think of him any more. A serious engagement would take place on the morrow, he had a presentiment that he should not return to the camp alive, and he sent her a last farewell. Alas! she knew it. It was no fault of his

if he had not met the death he courted. He had done all he could to die. The martyr of his own conscience, he had wished to punish himself. She reflected that when he went away it was because he was tortured by remorse, not that he had ceased to love her. He had not been disloyal towards her. He had only sacrificed her to honour. How he must have suffered! She remembered his sadness. She saw him again in memory. Her lacerated heart expanded, a flood of tears rose to her eyes, and she wept afresh, but not with rage or jealousy.

"Madame!" cried Blanche, who so far did not dare to hope.

Sarah answered by throwing Pierre's letters towards her rival. "There, burn them!" she cried in a terrible voice.

Blanche uttered a cry of wild delight. She lighted a taper, and in a moment the only material proof of the sin was annihilated. Sarah watched the fragments of charred paper as they fell, and it seemed to her as if her hatred had been wafted away with the smoke arising from their cinders.

"May he be happy, since he can still be so!" she said. "I give him to you!" And withdrawing her hand which Blanche was passionately kissing, she added, "Pray God that He may let me forget!"

She gave a final glance at the door by which Pierre had left the room, and then, feeling much relieved, she firmly walked away.

At the bottom of the stairs she found Frossard, who was waiting for her. At the first glance the worthy fellow divined what had happened, for Sarah was transfigured as it were. "Where shall I go?" she asked, thinking of the letter which the Count must have received by now. "I cannot return home——"

"And why not?" Frossard quietly asked.

Sarah hesitated to reply: but at last, lowering her brow, she said: "My husband knows the truth."

"No, madame, you are mistaken," said the young notary. "The letter you intended for him was intercepted by me. Forgive me for doing so—I tore it up without reading it. Return home again quietly. You can have

employed your time in visiting Mrs Stewart. In default of happiness you will at least have peace."

Sarah did not speak, but offered her hand to Frossard, who pressed it with emotion, and getting into the cab which had brought her to the Rue de Bellechasse, she drove back to the Hotel de Canalheilles.

Two days later, shortly before the time appointed for the departure of the Marseilles express, Pierre and Blanche were walking along the platform of the Gare de Lyon. The last rays of the sun, which had already sunk behind the horizon, cast a ruddy glow over the western sky. A slight mist was falling with the twilight. The hum of the great city was gradually becoming fainter. And in the growing darkness the pale light of the street lamps began to shine. The young couple were silent; as if they feared by speaking to shorten the last moments they had to remain together. Séverac was about to return to his post, whilst Blanche remained in Paris. She had expressed the wish to do so, and her wish had been an order for him. These two beings, who loved each other so fondly, were separated by a feeling of bashful delicacy due to the memory of that great sin; and now they were on the point of bidding each other farewell, and perhaps for ever. In the vehicle which had brought them to the railway station Pierre had twenty times been on the point of exclaiming: "Forgive me! forget! have you saved me only to make me suffer? I love you so!" But on raising his eyes to Blanche he had found her looking so sad that, fearing he might offend her, he had not dared to speak. And now, distressed, walking alongside of this train which would soon be ready to start, he reflected that in a few minutes he should be far away from her, and that he should perhaps never see her dear face again.

No doubt his thoughts corresponded with Blanche's, for she looked at him. He gently took hold of her hand, passed it through his arm and pressed it tightly to his side, as if he did not wish it to leave him. She let him do so; and they stood motionless in front of the compartment, in which Séverac had already placed his smaller articles of luggage. The voice of the porter calling to the pass-

engers. "Now then, gentlemen, make haste!" caused them a frightful pang. The moment they dreaded had arrived, they must bid each other good-bye.

Pierre made an effort. "Blanche," said he, "I recommend my mother to you. I gone, she will be all alone. She loves me very dearly and she will be greatly grieved. Take my place near the poor woman, will you? Grant her the affection I have proved unworthy of. And should I never return—for one must foresee everything—do not abandon her. Will you promise it me?"

He was unable to continue, but he looked anxiously at Blanche. Too much touched to answer, trembling all over, she made a gesture of acquiescence and held out her hand. He caught hold of it with passionate eagerness and pressed it to his lips. Then tearing himself away he stepped into the carriage. She remained near the foot-board in front of the open door. With her eyelids half closed and her bosom oppressed, she seemed to be fighting a supreme battle with herself. Pierre's eyes were fixed upon her, all his vitality seemed concentrated in his gaze. The guard ran forward and cried, "Time's up, madame, we start." Blanche turned round and saw that the platform was deserted. She beheld herself alone, remaining behind, whilst the man she loved journeyed far away. "No, it is impossible," she said to herself. Something stronger than will impelled her, and with a bound she sprang into the compartment beside Séverac.

He uttered a cry. The train started. She pressed her hand to her husband's lips, and then, weeping at once with shame and joy, she let her head fall upon his shoulder, averting her face so that he might not perceive her blushes.

CHAPTER XX

THE Countess de Canalheilles became extremely ill on the morrow of Blanche and Pierre's departure. The doctors said that she must have taken cold. Worthy Mrs Stewart, who

had not started for Scotland, installed herself at her bedside, tended her with admirable devotion, and at last had the satisfaction of seeing her out of danger. After experiencing cruel agony the Count began to hope again. Still the patient's strength did not return to her. She remained languishing and blighted, like a beautiful flower attacked by some hidden worm. She lay stretched on a couch for whole days together, gazing into space, and without speaking a word. However, when the Count, who felt anxious at seeing her recovery so long delayed, asked her if she suffered, she smiled and gently answered "No."

She roused herself for the marriage of Frossard and Madeleine; for Merlot was seized rather late in the day with seemingly inexplicable sympathy for the young notary, and granted him his daughter's hand. Sarah attended the wedding, and her star, which had for three years shone over Parisian society, sparkled on that occasion for the last time. The Countess showed herself as charming as during the glad days of her happiness. In fact, she did not wish to sadden the fête; and by dint of painful efforts she thus secretly paid Frossard the debt of gratitude she owed him. But the wedding over, she relapsed into her melancholy condition, and again spent her time, sleeping or meditating, stretched upon a couch.

The Count was greatly grieved, and consulted several physicians, who declared that Sarah's malady belonged to the unlimited category of nervous disorders. When one of them, a professor of the faculty, was made acquainted with the Countess's English origin, he gravely let the word "spleen" fall from above his white cravat, and advised a change of air. The Count proposed a tour in Italy, and Sarah gave her consent. There, or elsewhere, what did it matter to her? They stayed at Naples during the winter, in the midst of foliage and flowers, under the vivifying sun, and with a marvellous horizon before them. However, Sarah still remained pale and sad. Her disorder was not dispelled. Indeed, no remedy could reach it, for it was at the heart. In the spring she expressed a wish to go to Ireland, and visit the estates which her adoptive mother

had bequeathed to her. She gazed with delight on the dusty roads which she had trudged along barefooted in her childhood. The air of the woods and meadows brought back a little colour to her cheeks, and she seemed to live again.

The Count, who was delighted, installed himself at Dunloe Castle, an old feudal pile overlooking a deep blue lake. He organised numerous pleasure parties. A visit was paid to the celebrated glen, among the rugged rocks of which the invading Danes were vanquished and massacred by the Saxons; and they glided gently over the rippling waters of the lake, girt round with pasture lands and verdant foliage. Sarah consented to whatever the Count proposed, and always greeted him with smiles and gentle words. When she stood of an evening on the terrace of the castle, in a pensive attitude, and letting her eyes wander over the lovely prospects around her, with her graceful form standing out against the clear horizon, she looked like Mignon aspiring to heaven.

One day during a sail on the lake the Count let a walking-stick he was holding in his hand fall into the water. It whirled round for a moment and then disappeared; and as he expressed astonishment at not seeing it rise to the surface again, one of the boatmen exclaimed: "You won't see it any more, sir. Everything that disappears even for a second under this water never comes up again. The old folks say that there is a fairy at the bottom of the lake, and that she keeps everything that reaches her."

The explanation made the Count smile, and with a gesture he thanked the boatman. Sarah was letting her hand dangle in the blue water, which rippled along athwart her white fingers; and looking at the calm expanse, in which the foliage of the banks and the azure of the sky were mirrored, she softly murmured, "It would be a lovely tomb." Twilight was just then falling as they landed, and no further mention was made either of the fairy or the lake.

On the morrow, after reading the letters which had arrived for him by the post, the Count went out with the

view of giving various orders, and remained for some time in the meadows, watching several thoroughbred yearlings as they galloped about. During his absence Sarah proceeded to his study, and sat down near the window to await his return. A letter, which lay open on a table near by, suddenly attracted her attention. It seemed to her that she could recognise Blanche's handwriting. At last she rose and took it up, and found that it had indeed come from Pierre's wife. A few words caught her eyes, and she was unable to refrain from reading further. "In a few weeks I shall be a mother, my dear uncle—I hope that you will love the child that God is about to send us."

Sarah allowed the letter of her happy, blessed, triumphant rival to fall from her hands. She remained erect, silent, but with a savage gleam in her eyes; then horrible sobs suddenly made her bosom heave, heart-rending cries escaped her lips, and as if to escape observation, she darted out of the castle, and hurried along a pathway of the deserted park.

When the Count came home he sought for her without finding her. He went into the park and called her by name, but there was no answer. In his astonishment he made inquiries, and was told that no one had seen the Countess. Now thoroughly alarmed, he searched for some clue, however faint, and on espying traces of Sarah's footsteps at the bottom of the steps, he followed them along the pathways. He thus approached the margin of the lake. Overwhelmed with frightful anxiety, he looked still further. There, at the very edge of the water, were the deep imprints of two tiny feet, as if the young woman had paused for some time on that spot, no doubt to murmur a prayer. Beyond, no further trace could be detected. The Count uttered a cry; he gazed despairingly in front of him. There was only the far expanse of quiescent, shining, and silent water.

Sarah had gone to confide her painful secret to the fairy.

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